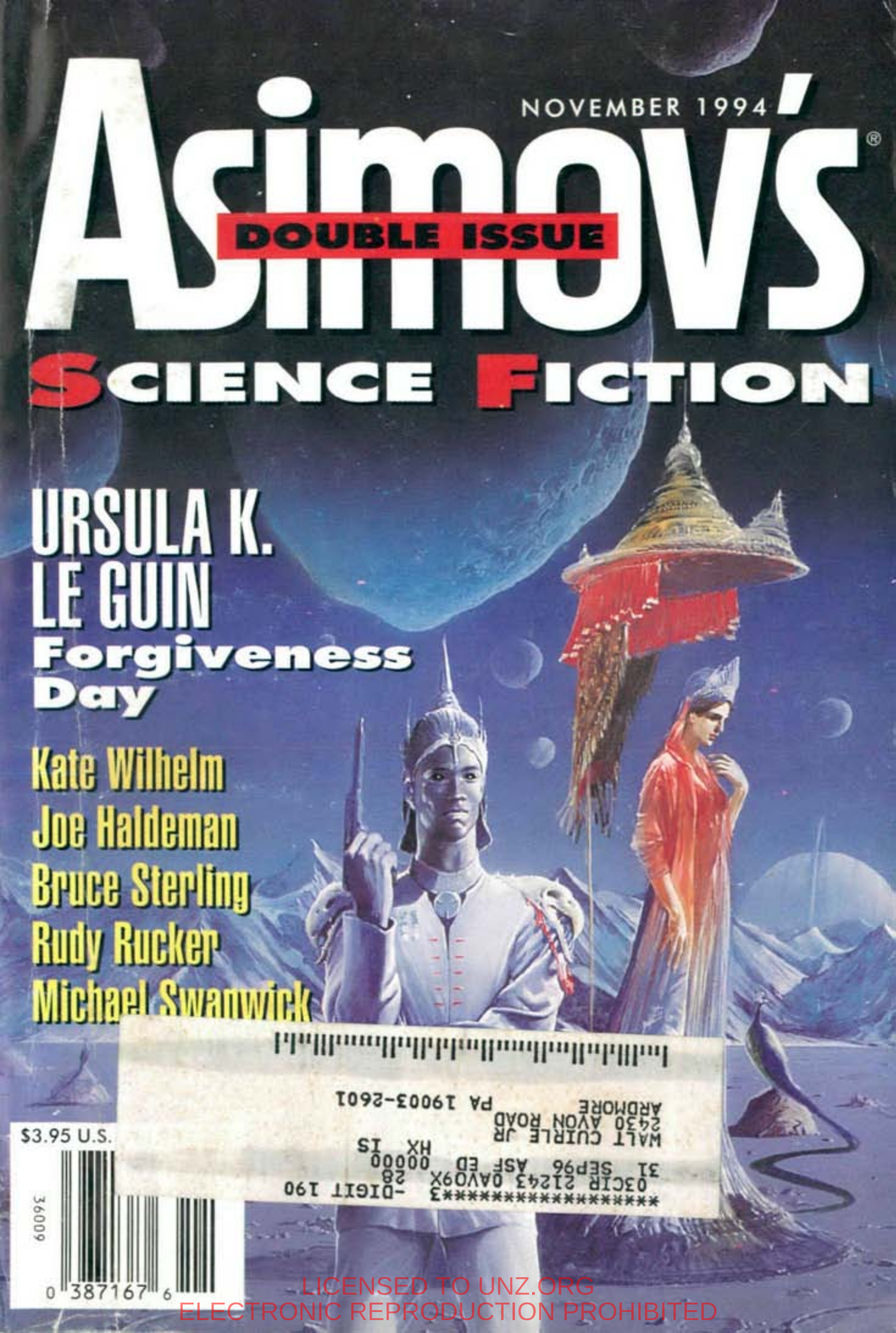

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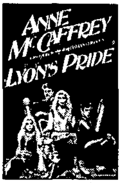
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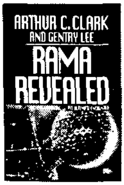
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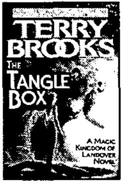
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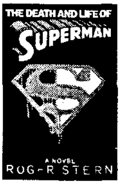
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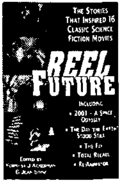
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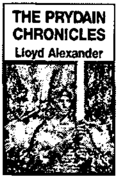
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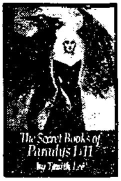
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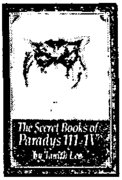
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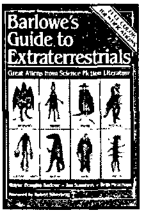
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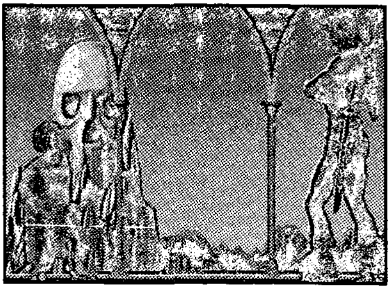

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

John Cheever speaks in his journals of reading John Updike's essays on Borges and Nabokov and coming away with the feeling of "the thrill of writing, of playing on this team, the truly thrilling sense of this as an adventure."

Exactly so. *The thrill of playing on this team.* Like so many of my colleagues in science fiction I am by nature pretty solitary, even reclusive, certainly stubbornly independent-minded and individualistic. And yet I have always thought of the group of writers who created the thing we think of as "science fiction" as a team, a collegial unit, a closely knit group of players, and I have felt fierce pride and excitement at being a member of that team. Even after four decades as a science fiction writer, I still continue to feel the thrill of knowing that I am part of it—that I play on the same team as Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, L. Sprague de Camp, A. E. van Vogt, Henry Kuttner, Clifford D. Simak, Jack Vance, and the other stellar performers of my youth.

At first, of course, I was just a fan sitting in the bleachers, watching the big stars do their stuff, and scarcely daring to imagine that I would ever be allowed to get down on the playing field among them. That was back in the mid-1940s, when I was just entering my teens, and John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction* (the ancestor of today's *Analog*) was the arena in which nearly everything of any interest in the science fiction world was happening, and each month's issue brought some extraordinary new event. What? Asimov has written a new Foundation story? Wonderful! What? Heinlein is back, after his long silence during World War II? Terrific! What? A three-part serial by L. Ron Hubbard? Will it be as good as *Final Blackout?* And what's this? A new Mutant story by Kuttner? De Camp beginning a new series? Doc Smith finally finishing the Lensman epic? One by one, the top players took their turn at bat, swung their mighty swings, sent the ball far out of sight.

Over the next few years I watched new stars come up out of the minor leagues and move right in alongside my early heroes: Alfred Bester, Robert Sheckley, Frederik Pohl, Algis Budrys, Philip K. Dick, James Blish, James Gunn, Poul Anderson, Cyril

Kornbluth, Gordon Dickson, Frank M. Robinson, William Tenn, Richard Matheson. Each had something new and fresh to say, each said it in a distinctly individual manner. Some, like Walter M. Miller, Jr., John D. MacDonald, and Wilmar Shiras, came and went in a hurry, making astonishing debuts and then moving on to other places or other activities. But most of the newcomers stayed around, steadily making their contributions, winning their permanent places on the team.

And I, in time, found myself being allowed down on the playing field at last—more or less as a batboy, in the beginning, a kid permitted to rub shoulders with the players but not in any real way part of the team. That was all right. I was eighteen. You don't ordinarily expect to get into the starting lineup at eighteen. It was glory enough for me just to walk through a corridor of the hotel where the Worldcon was taking place and have some well-known writer —Robert Bloch, say, or Harry Harrison, or Lester del Rey— wave and grin and call out, "Hi, Bob," as I went past him.

And then, a year or two later, to get the opportunity to pinch-hit occasionally—to fill a small slot in one of the lesser magazines with a very brief story, because one of the editors (Bob Lowndes, Howard Browne, Bill Hamling) had come up a few thousand words short as he was trying to put the next issue together: that was when I began to

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think I was actually going to make the team. Which indeed I did, very shortly afterward. Bit by bit it all began to happen: my name on a magazine cover; the lead position in the table of contents; a novel serialized in several issues; a book published in actual hard covers. All those painfully accomplished steps on the path toward success in my chosen profession—things I take for granted now, of course, but of enormous symbolic importance when I was a new young writer.

A member of the team, yes. Taking something that Asimov or Kuttner or Sturgeon had done, and looking at it in my own way, and giving it some new and original spin. Or contributing plots, ideas, themes, characters, of my own, which perhaps Fred Pohl or Bob Sheckley would look at years later and transpose into stories that were uniquely Pohlian or Sheckleyesque. For so it goes in science fiction (or so it went, at least, in the much smaller SF field of the 1950s and 1960s, when it was still possible for the writers to read just about every science fiction book and story being published, and we all did): we collaborate indirectly, each member of the team adding something to the general pot of concepts and techniques for others to take and use and transform.

Though reading all the SF that gets published is no longer a manageable proposition, the concept of a common pool of science fictional conceptualization still exists, and there is scarcely one of us who has not added something to it. Of course, the longer you've been around, the more you've been able to add. These days I often read reviews of books or stories that are described as "Silverbergian" in manner, or hear of some new writer who has come up with an entirely new take on something I did decades ago in *Dying Inside* or *Downward to the Earth,* and—as a former bat-boy on this team—I'm delighted by the notion that somewhere along the way I was able to move into a starring position eventually, and bring off a couple of maneuvers that newer players might want to emulate and absorb into their own bag of tricks.

That, I think, is what John Cheever meant by "the truly thrilling sense of this as an adventure." *We are all in this together,* all of us oddly assorted one-of-a-kind people, working within the common body of material and methods that is science fiction and striving to employ that material and those methods to create something that will extend and amplify what has gone before. I could not have written as I did without having read Kuttner and Sheckley and Dick and Sturgeon and all their illustrious predecessors; Sheckley would not have achieved what he did had not Kuttner shown the way, and Phil Dick had van Vogt (and also the versatile Kuttner) to guide him; and everybody, even Asimov and Arthur Clarke, owed something to Heinlein, and Heinlein

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would not have been the writer he was but for the pioneering work of H. G. Wells.

A team, yes. You watch the stars strutting their stuff, and then you say, timidly or aggressively according to your manner, "Here, let me take a few swings," and you move into position and have your chance at the big time. The lucky ones—by which I mean, really, the talented and determined and durable ones—actually attain a place on the team, some through genius that simply will not be denied, some through persistence and perspiration, some through wild and inexplicable good fortune.

I wanted nothing more, when I was a boy, than the thrill of playing on this team, and I have had it now for my entire adult life. What an extraordinary pleasure it has been to have such senior writers as Jack Williamson or Isaac Asimov or Sprague de Camp, who had been my idols, become my friends instead! And—as a senior figure myself, by now—I have also enjoyed the counterbalancing pleasure of seeing new young writers try out for the team—Joe Haldeman, George Alec Effinger, Gardner Dozois, Kim Stanley Robinson, Greg Benford, and so many others—and make the grade and turn into valued colleagues and dear friends of mine.

I don't know how it works among professional athletes, but one interesting feature of the team that I happen to belong to is the general absence of professional jealousy, at least between older and newer members of the team. A major-league baseball team, I think, can have only twenty-five members or thereabouts, and the only way a new man can make the team is for some veteran to lose his job. This tends to make for some discomfort among the established pros as a hot new rookie manifests himself in the pre-season training sessions.

It doesn't work that way in science fiction. No one, so far as I am aware, muttered dark and uneasy thoughts about my prolificity when I appeared on the scene in the middle 1950s and began filling all the SF magazines at once with my stories. Instead I got sincere and helpful advice, in the early days of my career, from the likes of Lester del Rey and Fred Pohl and Jim Blish and Will F. Jenkins, who might more reasonably have been expected to wonder whether I was going to crowd them off the contents pages singlehandedly. And so it has always gone, the older writers welcoming the newcomers, watching their performances with interest, occasionally showing them a thing or two when a corrective suggestion might seem appropriate.

Perhaps those writers who come up around the same time eye each other more balefully, out of fear that they will be surpassed by one of their contemporaries. But I don't recall that it worked that way when I was starting out, when my fellow newcomers included such folk as John Brunner, Harlan Ellison, Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, and J. G. Ballard, and then, a couple of years later, Ben Bova, Ursula Le Guin, and Larry Niven. It seems to me that we maintained amiable collegial feelings at all times.

It may be different in today's more crowded writing world—I don't really know—but somehow I doubt that Stan Robinson loses much sleep over the quality of John Varley's new book, or that Nancy Kress frets unduly that Connie Willis is winning too many Hugos, or that Bruce Sterling keeps count of the number of times that the names of James Patrick Kelly or Walter Jon Williams appear on the cover of this magazine. I prefer to think that they are all reading each other's brilliant work with high appreciation, as I do, and are responding with sincere applause—the heartfelt congratulation that one member of the team owes another for a job well done, as we all go onward together in the great adventure that is science fiction. ●

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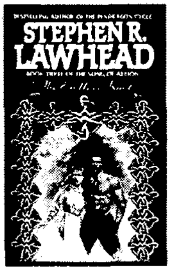

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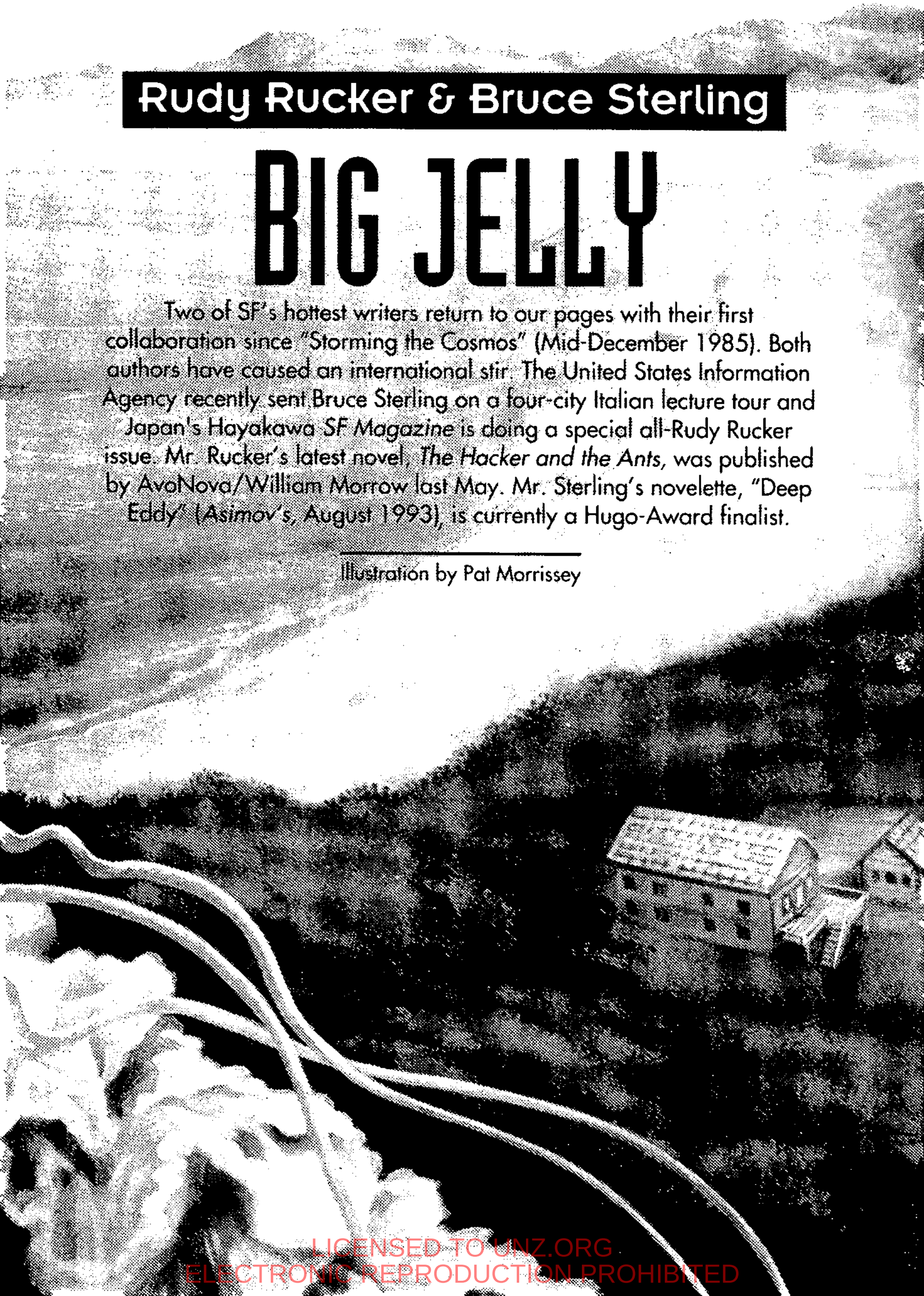

The screaming metal jellyfish dragged long, invisible tentacles across the dry concrete acres of the San Jose airport. Or so it seemed to Tug—Tug Mesoglea, math-drunk programmer and fanatic aquarist. Tug was working on artificial jellyfish, and nearly everything looked like a jellyfish to him, even airplanes. Tug was here in front of the baggage claim to pick up Texas billionaire Revel Pullen.

It had taken a deluge of phone-calls, faxes and e-mail to lure the reclusive Texan venture-capitalist from his decrepit, polluted East Texas oil-fields, but Tug had now coaxed Revel Pullen to a second face-to-face meet in California. At last, it seemed that Tug's unconventional high-tech startup scheme would charge into full-scale production. The prospect of success was sweet.

Tug had first met Revel in Monterey two months earlier, at the Spring symposium of the ACM SIGUSC, that is, the Association for Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group for Underground and Submarine Computation.

At the symposium, Tug had given a badly botched presentation on artificial jellyfish. He'd arrived with five hundred copies of a glossy desktop-published brochure: "Artificial Jellyfish: Your Route to Postindustrial Global Competitiveness!" But when it came time for Tug's talk, his 15-terabyte virtual jellyfish-demo had crashed so hideously that he couldn't even reboot his machine—a cheap Indonesian Sun-clone laptop that Tug now used as a bookend. Tug had brought some slides as a backup, but of course the slide-tray had jammed. And, worst of all, the single working prototype of Tug's plastic artificial jellyfish had burst in transit to Monterey. After the talk, Tug, in a red haze of shame, had flushed the sodden rags of decomposing gel down the conference center's john.

Tug had next headed for the cocktail lounge, and there the garrulous young Pullen had sought him out, had a few drinks with him, and had even picked up the tab—Tug's wallet had been stolen the night before by a cute older busboy.

Since Tug's topic was jellyfish, the raucous Pullen had thought it funny to buy rounds of tequila jelly-shots. The slimy jolts of potent boozy Jell-O had combined with Revel's bellowed jokes, brags, and wild promises to ease the pain of Tug's failed speech.

The next day, Tug and Revel had brunched together, and Revel had written Tug a handsome check as earnest money for pre-development expenses. Tug was to develop an artificial jellyfish capable of undersea oil prospecting.

As software applications went, oil-drilling was a little roughnecked and analog for Tug's taste; but the money certainly looked real enough.

The only troubling aspect about dealing with Revel was the man's obsession with some new and troublesome organic slime which his family's oldest oil-well had recently tapped. Again and again, the garish Texan had steered the conversation away from jellyfish and onto the subject of ancient subterranean slime.

Perched now on the fire-engine red hood of his expensive Animata sports car, Tug waited for Revel to arrive. Tug had curly dark hair and a pink-cheeked complexion. He wore shorts, a sport shirt, and Birkenstock sandals with argyle socks. He looked like a depraved British schoolboy. He'd bought the Animata with his house-money nest-egg when he'd learned that he would never, ever, be rich enough to buy a house in California. Leaning back against the windshield of his car, Tug stared at the descending airplanes and thought about jellyfish trawling through sky-blue seawater.

Tug had whole tankfuls of jellies at home: one tank with flattish moon jellies each with its four whitish circles of sex organs, another tank with small clear bell jellies from the eel grass of Monterey bay, a large tank with sea nettles that had long frilly oral arms and whiplike purple tentacles covered with stinging cells, a smaller tank of toadstool-like spotted jellies from Jellyfish Lake in Palau, a special tank of spinning comb-jellies with trailing ciliated arms, a Japanese tank with umbrella jellies—and more.

Next to the arsenal of tanks was the huge color screen of Tug's workstation. Tug was no biologist; he'd blundered under the spell of jellies while using mathematical algorithms to generate cellular models of vortex sheets. To Tug's mathematician's eye, a jellyfish was a highly perfected relationship between curvature and torsion, just like a vortex sheet, only a jellyfish was working off dynamic tension and osmotic stress. Real jellyfish were gnarlier than Tug's simulations. Tug had become a dedicated amateur of coelenteratology.

Imitating nature to the core, Tug found a way to evolve and improve his vortex sheet models via genetic programming. Tug's artificial jellyfish algorithms competed, mutated, reproduced and died inside the virtual reality of his workstation's sea-green screen. As Tug's algorithms improved, his big computer monitor became a tank of virtual jellyfish, of graphic representations of Tug's equations, pushing at the chip's computational limits, slowly pulsing about in dimly glowing simulation-space.

The living jellies in the tanks of true seawater provided an objective standard toward which Tug's programs could try to evolve. At every hour of the day and night, video cameras peered into the spot-lit water tanks, ceaselessly analyzing the jellyfish motions and feeding data into the workstation.

The recent, crowning step of Tug's investigations was his manufacturing breakthrough. His theoretical equations had become actual piezoplastic constructions—soft, watery, gelatinous robot jellies of real plastic in the real world. These models were produced by using an intersecting pair of laser beams to sinter—that is, to join together by heating without melting—the desired shape within a matrix of piezoplastic microbeads. The sintered microbeads behaved like a mass of cells: each of them could compress or elongate in response to delicate vibratory signals, and each microbead could in turn pass information to its neighbors.

A completed artificial jellyfish model was a floppy little umbrella that beat in steady cellular waves of excitation and relaxation. Tug's best plastic jellyfish could stay active for up to three weeks.

Tug's next requirement for his creations was "a killer application," as the software tycoons called it. And it seemed he might have that killer app in hand, given his recent experiments in making the jellyfish sensitive to chemical scents and signals. Tug had convinced Revel—and half-believed himself—that the artificial jellies could be equipped with radio-signaling chips and set loose on the sea floor. They could sniff out oil-seeps in the ocean bottom and work their way deep into the vents. If this were so, then artificial jellyfish would revolutionize undersea oil prospecting.

The only drawback, in Tug's view, was that offshore drilling was a contemptible crime against the wonderful environment that had bred the real jellies in the first place. Yet the plan seemed likely to free up Texas venture capital, enough capital to continue his research for at least another year. And maybe in another year, thought Tug, he would have a more ecologically sound killer app, and he would be able to disentangle himself from the crazy Texan.

Right on cue, Revel Pullen came strolling down the exit ramp, clad in the garb of a white-trash oil-field worker: a flannel shirt and a pair of Can't-Bust-'Em overalls. Revel had a blond crewcut and smooth dark skin. The shirt was from Nieman-Marcus and the overalls were ironed, but they seemed to be genuinely stained with dirt-fresh Texas crude.

Tug hopped off the hood of his car and stood on tiptoe to wave, deliberately camping it up to jangle the Texan's nerves. He drew up a heel behind him like Marilyn Monroe waving in *The Misfits*.

Nothing daunted, Revel Pullen headed Tug's way with an exaggerated bowlegged sprawl and a scuff of his python-skin boots. Revel was the scapegrace nephew of Amarillo's billionaire Pullen Brothers. The Pullen clan were malignant market speculators and greenmail raiders who had once tried to corner the world market in molybdenum.

Revel himself, the least predictable of his clan, was in charge of the Pullen Brothers' weakest investments: the failing oil wells that had

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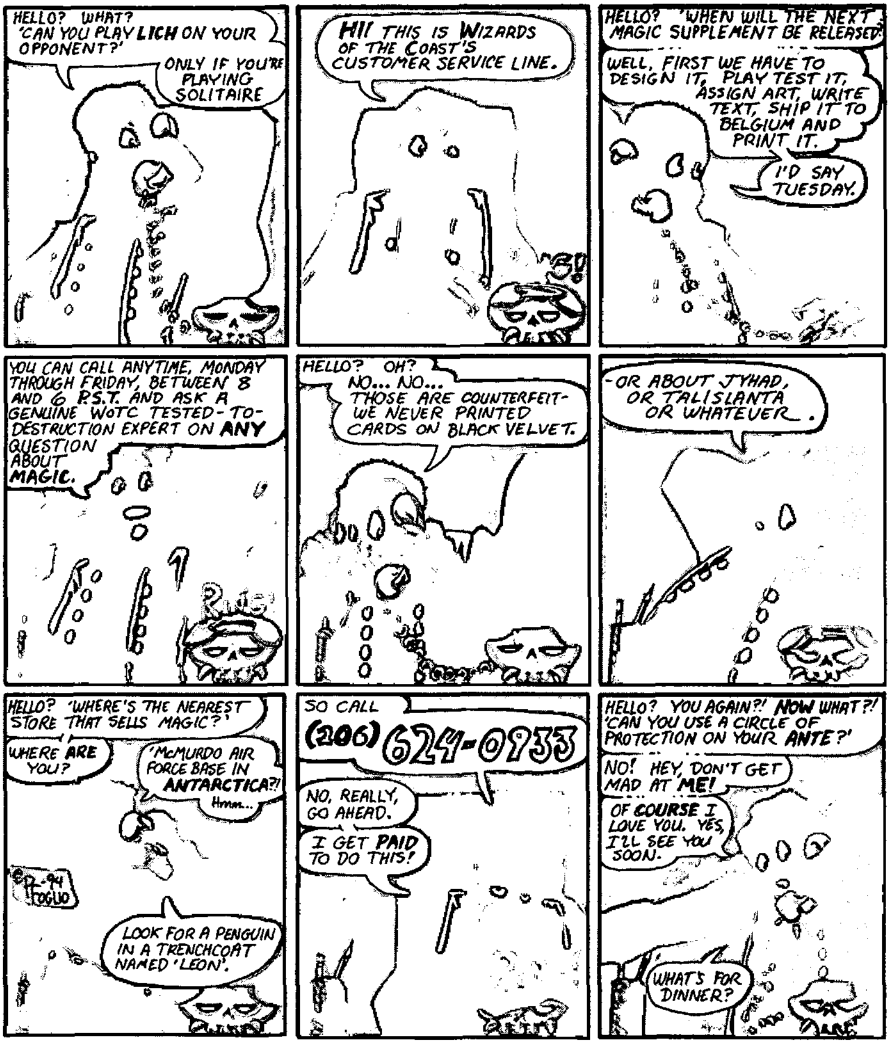
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initially brought the Pullen family to prominence—beginning with the famous Ditheree Gusher, drilled near Spindletop, Texas, in 1892.

Revel's quirk was his ambition to become a high-tech tycoon. This was why Revel attended computer-science meetings like SIGUSC, despite his stellar ignorance of everything having to do with the movement of bytes and pixels.

Revel stood ready to sink big money into a technically sexy Silicon Valley start-up. Especially if the start-up could somehow do something for his family's collapsing oil industry and—though this part still puzzled Tug—find a use for some odd clear fluid that Revel's engineers had recently been pumping from the Ditheree hole.

"Shit howdy, Tug," drawled Revel, hoisting his polyester/denim duffel bag from one slim shoulder to another. "Mighty nice of y'all to come meet me."

Beaming, Tug freed his fingers from Revel's insistent grip and gestured toward the Animata. "So, Revel! Ready to start a business? I've decided we should call it Ctenophore, Inc. A *ctenophore* is a kind of hermaphroditic jellyfish which uses a comblike feeding organ to filter nutrients from the ocean; they're also called comb-jellies. Don't you think Ctenophore is a perfect name for our company? Raking in the dollars from the economy's mighty sea!"

"Not so loud!" Revel protested, glancing up and down the airport pavement in a parody of wary street-smarts. "As far as any industrial spy knows, I'm here in California on a personal vacation." He heaved his duffel into the back of Tug's car. Then he straightened, and reached deep into the baggy trouser-pocket of his Can't-Bust-'Ems.

The Texan dragged out a slender pill-bottle filled with clear viscous jelly and pressed the crotch-warmed vial into Tug's unwilling palm, with a dope-dealer's covert insistence. "I want you to keep this, Tug. Just in case anything should . . . you know . . . happen to me."

Revel swiveled his narrow head to scan the passers-by with paranoid alertness, briefly reminding Tug of the last time he'd been here at the San Jose airport: to meet his ailing father, who'd been fingerpaint-the-wall-with-shit senile and had been summarily dumped on the plane by Tug's uncle. Tug had gotten his father into a local nursing home, and last summer Tug's father had died.

Life was sad, and Tug was letting it slip through his fingers—he was an unloved gay man who'd never see thirty again, and now here he was humoring a nutso het from Texas. Humoring people was not something Tug excelled at.

"Do you really have enemies?" said Tug. "Or do you just think so? Am I supposed to think you have enemies? Am I supposed to care?"

"There's money in these plans of ours—real foldin' money," Revel bragged darkly, climbing into the Animata's passenger seat. He waited silently until Tug took the wheel and shut the driver's-side door. "All we really gotta worry about," Revel continued at last, "is controlling the publicity. The environmental impact crap. You didn't tell anybody about what I e-mailed you, did you?"

"No," snapped Tug. "That cheap public-key encryption you're using has garbled half your messages. What are you so worried about, anyway? Nobody's gonna care about some slime from a played-out oil-well—even if you do call it *Urschleim*. That's German, right?"

"Shhhhh!" hissed Revel.

Tug started the engine and gunned it with a bluish gust of muscular combustion. They swung out into the endless California traffic.

Revel checked several times to make sure that they weren't being trailed. "Yes, I call it *Urschleim,*" he said at last, portentously. "In fact, I've put in a trademark for that name. Them old-time German professors were onto something. *Ur* means *primeval.* All life came from the Urschleim, the original slime! Primeval slime from the inner depths of the planet! You ever bitten into a green almond, Tug? From the tree? There's some green fuzz, a thin little shell and a center of clear, thick slime. That's exactly how our planet is, too. Most of the original Urschleim is still flowing, and oozing, and lyin' there 'way down deep. It's just waitin' for some bright boy to pump it out and exploit its commercial potential. Urschleim is life itself."

"That's pretty grandiose," said Tug evenly.

"Grandiose, hell!" Revel snapped. "It's the only salvation for the Texas oil business, compadre! God damn it, if we Texans don't drill for a living, we'll be reduced to peddling chips and software like a bunch of goddamn Pacific Rim computer weenies! You got me wrong if you think I'll give up the oil business without a fight!"

"Sure, sure, I'm hip," Tug said soothingly. "My jellyfish are going to help you find more oil, remember?" It was easy to tell when Revel had gone nonlinear—his Texan drawl thickened drastically and he began to refer to his beloved oil business as the "Aisle Bidness." But what was the story with this *Urschleim?*

Tug held up the pill-bottle of clear slime and glanced at it while steering with one hand. The stuff was thixotropic—meaning a gel that becomes liquid when shaken. You'd tilt the vial and all the Urschleim would be stuck in one end, but then, if you shook the bottle a bit, the slime's state would change and it would run down to the other end like ketchup suddenly gushing from a bottle. Smooth, clear ketchup. Snot.

"The Ditheree hole's oozin' with Urschleim right now!" said Revel, settling a pair of Italian sunglasses onto his freckled nose. He looked no older than twenty-five. "I brought three gallons of it in a tank in my duffel. One of my engineers says it's a new type of deep-lying oil, and another one says it's just water infected with bacteria. But I'm with old Herr Doktor Professor von Stoffman. We've struck the cell fluid of Mother Earth herself: undifferentiated tissue, Tug, primordial ooze. Gaia goo. Urschleim!"

"What did you do to make it start oozing?" asked Tug, suppressing a giggle.

Revel threw back his head and crowed. "Man, if OPEC got wind about our new high-tech extraction techniques. . . . you don't think I got enemies, son? Them sheikhs play for keeps." Revel tapped his knuckles cagily against the car's closed window. "Hell, even Uncle Sam'd be down on us if he knew that we've been twisting genes and seeding those old worn-out oilbeds with designer bacteria! They eat through tar and paraffin, change the oil's viscosity, unblock the pores in the stone and get it all fizzy with methane. . . . You wouldn't think the ol' Ditheree had it in 'er to blow valves and gush again, but we plumbed her out with a new extra-virulent strain. And what did she gush? Urschleim!"

Revel peered at Tug over the tops of his designer sunglasses, assuming what he seemed to think was a trustworthy expression. "But that ain't the half of it, Tug. Wait till I tell you what we did with the stuff once we had it."

Tug was impatient. Gusher or not, Revel's bizarre maunderings were not going to sell any jellyfish. "What did you think of that artificial jellyfish I sent you?"

Revel frowned. "Well, it looked okay when it showed up. About the size of a deflated football. I dropped in my swimmin' pool. It was floatin' there, kinda rippling and pulsing, for about two days. Didn't you say that sucker would run for weeks? Forty-eight hours and it was gone! Disintegrated I guess. Chlorine melted the plastic or something."

"No way," protested Tug, intensely. "It must have slipped out a crack in the side of your pool. I built that model to last three weeks for sure! It was my best prototype. It was a chemotactic artificial jellyfish designed to slither into undersea vents and find its way to underground oil beds."

"My swimming pool's not in the best condition," allowed Revel. "So I guess it's possible that your jellyfish did squeeze out through a crack. But if this oil-prospecting application of yours is any good, the thing should have come back with some usable geology data. And it never did come back that I noticed. Face it, Tug, the thing melted."

Tug wouldn't give in. "My jellyfish didn't send back information because I didn't put a tracer chip in it. If you're going to be so rude about it, I might as well tell you that I don't think oil prospecting is a very

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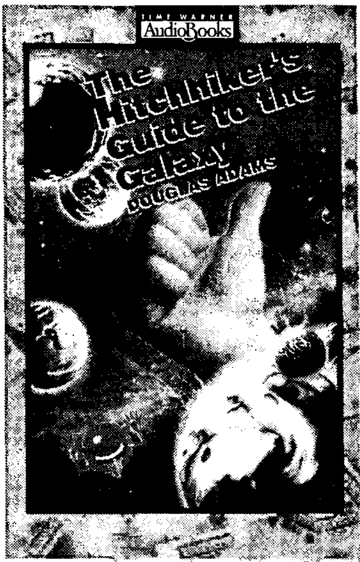

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honorable application. I'd really rather see the California Water Authority using my jellies to trace leaks in irrigation and sewage lines."

Revel yawned, sinking deeper into the passenger seat. "That's real public-spirited of you, Dr. Mesoglea. But California water ain't worth a dime to me."

Tug pressed onward. "Also, I'd like to see my jellyfish used to examine contaminated wells here in Silicon Valley. If you put an artificial jellyfish down a well, and leave it to pulsate down there for a week or two, it could filter up all kinds of trace pollutants! It'd be a great public-relations gambit to push the jelly's anti-pollution aspects. Considering your family history, it couldn't hurt to get the Pullen family in the good graces of the Environmental Protection people. If we angle it right, we could probably even swing a federal development grant!"

"I dunno, hombre," Revel grumbled. "Somehow it just don't seem sportin' to take money from the Feds. . . ." He gazed mournfully at the lushly exotic landscape of monkey-puzzle trees, fat pampered yuccas, and orange trees. "Man, everything sure looks *green* out here."

"Yes," Tug said absently, "thank God there's been a break in the drought. California has plenty of use for a jellyfish that can monitor water-leaks."

"It's not the water that counts," said Revel, "it's the carbon dioxide. Two hundred millions years' worth of crude oil, all burned to carbon dioxide and spewed right into the air in just a few decades. Plant life's goin' crazy. Why, all the plant life along this highway has built itself out of car exhausts! You ever think o' that?"

It was clear from the look of glee on Revel's shallow features that this thought pleased him mightily. "I mean, if you traced the history of the carbon in that weirdass-lookin' tree over there . . . hunnert years ago it was miles down in the primeval bowels of the earth! And since we eat plants to live, it's the same for people! Our flesh, brain and blood is built outa burnt crude-oil! We're creatures of the Urschleim, Tug. All life comes from the primeval goo."

"No way," said Tug heatedly. He took a highway exit to Los Perros, his own local enclave in the massive sprawl that was Silicon Valley. "One carbon atom's just like the next one. And once you're talking artificial life, it doesn't even have to be an 'atom' at all. It can be a byte of information, or a microbead of piezoplastic. It doesn't matter where the material came from—life is just a pattern of behavior."

"That's where you and me part company, boy." They were tooling down the main drag of Los Perros now, and Revel was gaping at some chicly dressed women. "Dig it, Tug, thanks to oil, a lot of carbon in your yuppie neighbors comes from Texas. Like or not, most modern life is fundamentally Texan."

"That's pretty appalling news, Revel," smiled Tug. He took the last remaining hilly corners with a squeal of his Michelins, then pulled into his driveway. He parked the Animata under the rotting, fungus-specked redwood deck of the absurdly overpriced suburban home that he rented. The rent was killing him. Ever since his lover had moved out last Christmas, Tug had been meaning to move into a smaller place, but somewhere deep down he nursed a hope that if he kept the house, some nice strong man would come and move in with him.

Next door, Tug's neighbors were flinging water-balloons and roaring with laughter as they sizzled up a huge aromatic rack of barbecued tofu. They were rich Samoans. They had a big green parrot named Toatoa. On fine days, such as today, Toatoa sat squawking on the gable of the house. Toatoa had a large yellow beak and a taste for cuttlebone and pumpkin-seeds.

"This is great," Revel opined, examining the earthquake-split walls and peeling ceiling sheetrock. "I was afraid we'd have some trouble findin' the necessary space for experiments. No problem, though, with you rentin' this sorry dump for a workshop."

"I live here," said Tug with dignity. "By California standards this is a very good house."

"No wonder you want to start a company!" Revel climbed the redwood stairs to Tug's outdoor deck, and dragged a yard-long plastic pressure-cylinder from within his duffel bag, flinging aside some balled-up boot socks and a set of watered-silk boxer shorts. "You got a garden hose? And a funnel?" He pulled a roll of silvered duct tape from the bottom of his bag.

Tug supplied a length of hose, prudently choosing one that had been severely scorched during the last hillside brushfire. Revel whipped a French designer pocketknife from within his Can't-Bust-'Ems and slashed off a three-foot length. He then deftly duct-taped the tin funnel to the end of the hose, and blew a few kazoo-like blasts.

Next Revel flung the crude horn aside and took up the pressure cylinder. "You don't happen to have a washtub, do you?"

"No problem," Tug said. He went into the house and fetched a large plastic picnic cooler.

Revel opened the petcock of the pressure cylinder and began decanting its contents into the cooler. The black nozzle slowly ejaculated a thick clear gel, rather like silicone putty. Pint after pint of it settled languorously into the white pebbly interior of the hinge-topped cooler. The stuff had a sulfurous, burning-rubber reek that Tug associated with Hawaii—a necessarily brief stay he'd had on the oozing, flaming slopes of Kilauea.

Tug prudently sidled across the deck and stood upwind of the cooler. "How far down did you obtain this sample?"

Revel laughed. "Down? Doc, this stuff broke the safety-valves on old Ditheree and blew drillin' mud over five counties. We had an old-time blue-ball gusher of it. It just kept comin', pourin' out over the ground. Kinda, you know, *spasmodic* . . . Finally ended up with a lake of clear hot pudding higher than the tops of pickups."

"Jesus, what happened then?" Tug asked.

"Some evaporated. Some soaked right into the subsoil. Disappeared. The first sample I scored was out of the back of some good ol' boy's Toyota. Lucky thing he had the tailgate up, or it woulda all run out."

Revel pulled out a handkerchief, wiped sweat from his forehead, and continued talking. "Of course, once we got the rig repaired, we did some serious pump-work. We Pullens happen to own a tank-farm near Nacogdoches, a couple of football fields' worth of big steel reservoirs. Hasn't seen use since the OPEC embargo of the '70s. The tanks were pretty much abandoned on site. But every one of them babies is brim-full with Revel Pullen's trademark Urschleim right now." He glanced up at the sun, looking a bit wild-eyed, and wiped his forehead again. "You got any beer in this dump?"

"Sure, Revel." Tug went into the kitchen for two bottles of Etna Ate, and brought them out to the deck.

Revel drank thirstily, then gestured with his makeshift horn. "If this don't work, well, you've gonna think I'm crazy." He pushed his Italian shades up onto the top of his narrow crewcut skull, and grinned. He was enjoying himself, "But if it *does* work, ol' son—you're gonna think *you're* crazy."

Revel dipped the end of the funnel into the quiescent but aromatic mass. He swirled it around, then held it up carefully and puffed.

A fat lozenge-shaped gelatinous bubble appeared at the end of the horn.

"Holy cow, it blows up just like a balloon," Tug said, impressed. "That's some kind of viscosity!"

Revel grinned wider, holding the thing at arm's length. "It gets better."

Tug Mesoglea watched in astonishment as the clear bubble of Urschleim slowly rippled and dimpled. A long double crease sank into the taut outer membrane of the gelatinous sphere, encircling it like the seam on an oversized baseball.

Now, with a swampy-sounding plop, the bubble came loose from the horn's tin muzzle and began to float in midair. A set of cilia emerged along the seam and the airborne jelly began to bob and beat its way upward.

"Urschleim!" whooped Revel.

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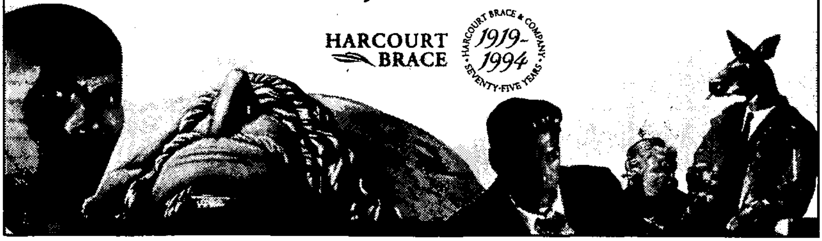

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"Jesus Christ," Tug said, staring in shocked fascination. The air jelly was still changing before his eyes, evolving a set of interior membranes, warping, pulsing, and rippling itself into an ever more precise shape, for all the world like a computer graphics program ray-tracing its image into an elegant counterfeit of reality. . . .

Then a draft of air caught it. It hit the eaves of the house sturdily, bounced, and drifted up over the roof and into the sky.

"I can hardly believe it," said Tug, staring upward. "Spontaneous symmetry breaking! A self-actuating reaction/diffusion system. This slime of yours is an excitable medium with emergent behavior, Revel! And that spontaneous fractalization of the structures . . . can you do it again?"

"As many times as you want," said Revel. "With as much Urschleim as you got. Of course, the smell kinda gets to you if you do it indoors."

"But it's so odd," breathed Tug. "That the slime out of your oil-well is forming itself into jellyfish shapes just as I'm starting to build jellyfish out of plastic."

"I figure it for some kind of a morphic resonance thing," nodded Revel. "This primeval slime's been trapped inside the Earth so long it's truly achin' to turn into something live and organic. Kind of like that super-weird worm and bacteria and clam shit that grows out of deep undersea vents."

"You mean *around* the undersea vents, Revel."

"No, Tug, right *out* of 'em. That's the part most people don't get."

"Whatever. Let me try blowing an Urschleim air jelly."

Tug dabbled the horn's tin rim in the picnic cooler, then huffed away at his own balloon of Urschleim. The sphere began to ripple internally, just as before, with just the same dimples and just the same luscious double crease. Tug had a sudden déjà vu. He'd seen this shape on his computer screen.

It started to float away, but frugal Revel darted forward and repeatedly slashed at it with his Swiss knife, finally causing the air-jelly to break into a flying burst of clear snot that splashed all over Tug's feet and legs. The magic goo felt tingly on Tug's skin. He wondered nervously if any of the slime might be passing into his bloodstream. Revel scooped most of the slime off the deck and put it back in the cooler.

"What do you think?" asked Revel.

"I'm overwhelmed," said Tug, shaking his head. "Your Urschleim jellyfish look so much like the ones I've been building in my lab. Let's go in. I'll show you my jellyfish while we think this through." Tug led Revel into the house.

Revel insisted on bringing the Urschleim-containing cooler and the empty pressure canister into the house. He even got Tug to throw an Indian blanket over them, "in case we get company."

Tug's jellyfish tanks filled up an entire room with great green bubbling glory. The aquarium room had been a domestic video game parlor during the early 1980s, when the home's original builder, a designer of shoot-'em-up computer twitch-games, had shored up the floor to accommodate two dozen massive arcade-consoles. This was a good thing too, for Tug's seawater tanks were a serious structural burden, and far outweighed all of Tug's other possessions put together, except maybe the teak waterbed that his ex-lover had left. Tug had bought the tanks themselves at a knockdown auction from the federal-seizure sale of an eccentric Oakland cocaine dealer, who had once used them to store schools of piranha.

Revel mulled silently over the tanks of jellyfish. Backlit by greenish glow from the spotlights of a defunct speed-metal crew, Tug's jellies were at their best. The backlighting brought out their most secret, most hidden interior curvatures, with an unblinking brilliance that was well-nigh pornographic.

Their seawater trace elements and Purina Jellyfish Lab Chow cost more than Tug's own weekly grocery bill, but his jelly menagerie had come to mean more to Tug than his own nourishment, health, money, or even his love-life. He spent long secret hours entranced before the gently spinning, ciliated marvels, watching them reel up their brine shrimp prey in mindless, reflexive elegance, absorbing the food in a silent ecstasy of poisonous goo. Live, digestive goo, that transmuted through secret alchemical biology into pulsating, glassy flesh.

Tug's ex-lover had been pretty sporting about Tug's goo-mania, especially compared to his other complaints about Tug's numerous perceived character flaws, but Tug figured his lover had finally been driven away by some deep rivalry with the barely organic. Tug had gone to some pains to Windex his noseprints from the aquarium glass before Revel arrived.

"Can you tell which ones are real and which ones I made from scratch?" Tug demanded triumphantly.

"You got me whipped," Revel admitted. "It's a real nice show, Tug. If you can really teach these suckers some tricks, we'll have ourselves a business."

Revel's denim chest emitted a ringing sound. He reached within his overalls, whipped out a cellular phone the size of a cigarette-pack, and answered it. "Pullen here! What? Yeah. Yeah, sure. Okay, see you." He flipped the phone shut and stowed it.

"Got you a visitor coming," he announced. "Business consultant I hired."

Tug frowned.

"My uncle's idea, actually," Revel shrugged. "Just kind of standard

Pullen procedure before we sink any real money in a venture. We got ourselves one of the best computer-industry consultants in the business."

"Yeah? Who?"

"Edna Sydney. She's a futurist, she writes a high-finance technology newsletter that's real hot with the boys in suits."

"Some strange woman is going to show up here and decide if my Ctenophore, Inc. is worth funding?" Tug's voice was high and shaky with stress. "I don't like it, Revel."

"Just try 'n' act like you know what you're doing, Tug, and then she'll take my Uncle Donny Ray a clean bill of health for us. Just a detail really." Revel laughed falsely. "My uncle's a little over-cautious. Belt-and-suspenders kinda guy. Lot of private investigators on his payroll and stuff. The old boy's just tryin' to keep me outa trouble, basically. Don't worry about it none, Tug."

Revel's phone rang again, this time from the pocket on his left buttock. "Pullen here! What? Yeah, I know his house don't look like much, but this is the place, all right. Yeah, okay, we'll let you in." Revel stowed the phone again, and turned to Tug. "Go get the door, man, and I'll double check that our cooler of Urschleim is out of sight."

Seconds later, Tug's front doorbell rang loudly. Tug opened it to find a woman in blue jeans, jogging shoes, and a shapeless gray wool jersey, slipping her own cellular phone into her black nylon satchel.

"Hello," she said. "Are you Dr. Mesoglea?"

"Yes, I am. Tug Mesoglea."

"Edna Sydney, Edna Sydney Associates."

Tug shook Edna Sydney's dainty blue-knuckled hand. She had a pointed chin, an impressively large forehead, and a look of extraordinary, almost supernatural intelligence in her dark brown shoebutton eyes. She had a neat cap of gray-streaked brown hair. She looked like a digital pixie leapt full-blown from the brain of Thomas Edison.

While she greeted Revel, Tug dug a business-card from his wallet and forced it on her. Edna Sydney riposted with a card from the satchel that gave office addresses in Washington, Prague, and Chicago.

"Would you care for a latte?" Tug babbled. "Tab? Pineapple-mango soda?"

Edna Sydney settled for a Jolt Cola, then gently maneuvered the two men into the jellyfish lab. She listened attentively as Tug launched into an extensive, arm-waving spiel.

Tug was inspired. Words gushed from him like Revel's Urschleim. He'd never before met anyone who could fully understand him when he talked techie jargon absolutely as fast as he could. Edna Sydney, however, not only comprehended Tug's jabber but actually tapped her foot occasionally and once politely stifled a yawn.

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"I've seen artificial life devices before," Edna allowed, as Tug began to run out of verbal ectoplasm. "I knew all those Santa Fe guys before they destroyed the futures exchanges and got sent off to Leavenworth. I wouldn't advise trying to break into the software market with some new genetic algorithm. You don't want to end up like Bill Gates."

Revel snorted. "Gates? Geez, I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy." He chortled aloud. "To think they used to compare that nerd to Rockefeller! Hell, Rockefeller was an oil business man, a family man! If Gates had been in Rockefeller's class, there'd be kids named Gates running half the states in the Union by now."

"I'm not planning to market the algorithms," Tug told the consultant. "They'll be a trade secret, and I'll market the jelly simulacra themselves. Ctenophore, Inc. is basically a manufacturing enterprise."

"What about the threat of reverse engineering?"

"We've got an eighteen-month lead," Revel bragged. "Round these parts, that's like eighteen years anywhere else! Besides, we got a set of ingredients that's gonna be mighty hard to duplicate."

"There hasn't been a lot of, uh, sustained industry development in the artificial jellyfish field before," Tug told her. "We've got a big R&D advantage."

Edna pursed her lips. "Well, that brings us to marketing, then. How are you going to get your products advertised and distributed?"

"Oh, for publicity, we'll do COMDEX, A-Life Developers, BioScience Fair, *MONDO 3000,* the works," Revel assured her. "And get this—we can ship jellies by the Pullen oil pipelines anywhere in North America for free! Try and match that for ease of distribution and clever use of an installed base! Hell, it'll be almost as easy as downloadin' software from the Internet!"

"That certainly sounds innovative," Edna nodded. "So—let's get to the crux of matters, then. What's the killer app for a robot jellyfish?"

Tug and Revel traded glances. "Our exact application is highly confidential," Tug said tentatively.

"Maybe *you* could suggest a few apps, Edna," Revel told her, folding his arms cagily over the denim chest of his Can't-Bust-'Ems. "Come on and *earn* your twenty thousand bucks an hour."

"Hmmm," the consultant said. Her brow clouded, and she sat in the armchair at Tug's workstation, her eyes gone distant. "Jellyfish. Industrial jellyfish . . . "

Greenish rippling aquarium light played across Edna Sydney's face as she sat in deep thought. The jellyfish kept up their silent, eternal pulsations; kept on bouncing their waves of contraction out and back between the centers and the rims of their bells.

"Housewares application," said Edna presently. "Fill them with lye and flush them through sinks and commodes. They agitate their way through sink traps and hairballs and grease."

"Check," said Tug alertly. He snatched a mechanical pencil from the desktop and began scribbling notes on the back of an unpaid bill.

"Assist fermentation in septic tanks by loading jellies with decomposition bacteria, then setting them to churn the tank sludge. Sell them in packs of thousands for city-sized sewage-installations."

"Outrageous," said Tug.

"Microsurgical applications inside plugged arteries. Pulsates plaque away gently, but disintegrates in the ventrical valves to avoid heart attacks."

"That would need FDA approval," Revel hedged. "Maybe a few years down the road."

"You can get a livestock application done in eighteen months,"said Enda. "It's happened in recombinant DNA."

"Copacetic," said Revel. "Lord knows the Pullens got a piece o' the cattle business!"

"If you could manufacture Portuguese man-o-war or other threatening toxic jellies," Edna said, "then you could set a few thousand right offshore in perhaps Hilton Head or Puerto Vallarta. After the tourist trade crashed, you could buy up shoreline property cheap and make a real killing." She paused. "Of course, that would be illegal."

"Right," Tug nodded, pencil scratching away. "Although my plastic jellyfish don't sting. I suppose we could implant pouches of toxins in them. . . ."

"It would also be unethical. And wrong."

"Yeah, yeah, we get it," Revel assured her. "Anything else?"

"Do the jellyfish reproduce?" asked Edna.

"No, they don't," Tug said. "I mean, not by themselves. They don't reproduce and they don't eat. I can manufacture as many as you want to any spec, though."

"So they're not truly alive, then? They don't evolve? They're not Type III a-life?"

"I evolved the algorithm for their behavior in my simulations, but the devices themselves are basically sterile robots with my best algorithms hard-coded in," Tug geeked fluently. "They're jellyfish androids that run my code. Not androids, coelenteroids."

"It's probably just as well if they don't reproduce," said Edna primly. "How big can you make them?"

"Well, not much bigger than a basketball at present. The lasers I'm currently using to sinter them are of limited capacity." Tug neglected to mention that he had the lasers out on unauthorized loan from San Jose

State University, thanks to a good friend in lab support at the School of Engineering. "In principle, a jellyfish could be quite large."

"So they're currently too small to live inside," said Edna thoughtfully.

Revel smiled. " 'Live inside,' huh? You're really something special, Edna."

"That's what they pay me for," she said crisply. She glanced at the screen of Tug's workstation, with its rich background color drifting from sky-blue to sea-green, and with a vigorous pack of sea-nettles pumping their way forward. "What genetic operators are you using to evolve your algorithms?"

"Standard Holland stuff. Proportional reproduction, crossover, mutation, and inversion."

"The Chicago a-life group came up with a new schemata-sensitive operator last week," said Edna. "Preliminary tests are showing a 40 percent speed-up for searching intractable sample spaces."

"Terrific! That would really be useful for me," said Tug. "I need that genetic operator."

Edna scribbled a file location and the electronic address of a downloading site on Tug's business card and gave it back to him. Then she glanced at a dainty wristwatch inside her left wrist. "Revel's uncle paid for a full hour plus travel. You two want to spring for a retainer, or do I go?"

"Uh, thanks a lot, but I don't think we can swing a retainer," Revel said modestly.

Edna nodded slowly, then touched one finger to her pointed chin. "I just thought of an angle for using your jellyfish in hotel swimming-pools. If your jellyfish don't sting, you could play with them like beach balls, they'd filtrate the water, and they could shed off little polyps to look for cracks. I just hate the hotel pools in California. They're surrounded by anorexic bleached blondes drinking margaritas made of chemicals with forty letters in their names. Should we talk some more?"

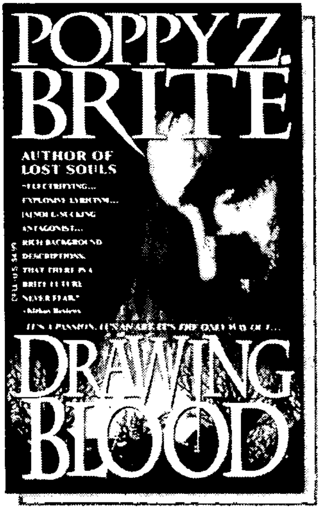
"If you don't like your pool, maybe you could take a nice dip in one of Tug's tanks," Revel said, with a glance at his own watch.

"Bad idea, Revel," Tug said hastily, "you get a good jolt from those natural sea-nettles and it'll stop your heart."

"Do you have a license for those venomous creatures?" Edna asked coolly.

Tug tugged his forelock in mock contrition. "Well, Ms. Sydney, amateur coelenteratology's kind of a poorly policed field."

Edna stood up briskly, and hefted her nylon bag. "We're out of time, so here's the bottom line," she said. "This is one of the looniest schemes I've ever seen. But I'm going to phone Revel's uncle with the go-ahead as soon as I get back into Illinois airspace. Risk-taking weirdos like you two are what makes this industry great, and the Pullen family can well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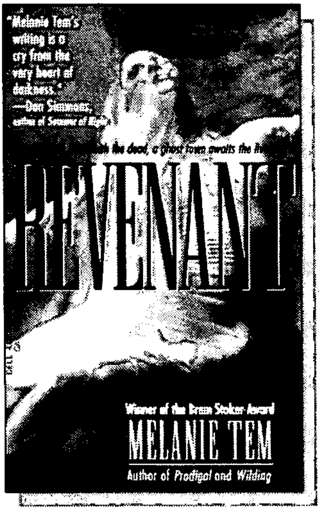
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afford to back you. I'm rooting for you boys. And if you ever need any cut-rate Kazakh programmers, send me e-mail."

"Thanks, Edna," Revel said.

"Yes," said Tug, "Thank you for all the good ideas." He saw her to the door.

"She didn't really sound very encouraging," Tug said after she left. "And her ideas were ugly, compared to ours. Fill my jellyfish with lye? Put them in septic tanks and in cow arteries? Fill them with poison to sting families on vacation?" He flung back his head and began camping back and forth across the room imitating Edna in a shrieking falsetto. "They're not Type III a-life? Oh dear! How I hate those anorexic blondes! Oh my!"

"Look, Tug, if Edna was a little underwhelmed it's just 'cause I didn't tell her everything!" said Revel. "A trade secret is a trade secret, boy, and three's a crowd. That gal's got a brain with the strength o' ten, but even Edna Sydney can't help droppin' certain hints in those pricey little newsletters of hers. . . ."

Revel whistled briefly, pleased with his own brilliance.

Tug's eyes widened in sudden, cataclysmic comprehension. "I've got it, Revel! I think I've got it! When you first saw an Urschleim air-jelly—was it before or after you put my plastic jellyfish in your swimming pool?"

"After, compardre. I only first thought of blowing Urschleim bubbles last week—I was drunk, and I did it to make a woman laugh. But you sent me that sorry-ass melting jellyfish a full six weeks ago."

"That 'sorry-ass melting jellyfish' found its way out a crack in your swimming pool and down through the shale beds into the Ditheree hole!" cried Tug exultantly. "Yes! That's it, Revel! My equations migrated right out into your goo!"

"Your software got into my primeval slime?" said Revel slowly. "How exactly is that s'posed to happen?"

"Mathematics represents optimal form, Revel," said Tug. "That's why it slips in everywhere. But sometimes you need a seed equation. Like if water gets cold, it likes to freeze; it freezes into a mathematical lattice. But if you have really cold water in a smooth tank, the water might not know how to freeze—until maybe a snowflake drifts into it. To make a long story short, the mathematical formations of my sintered jellyfish represent a low-energy phase space configuration that is stably attractive to the dynamics of the Urschleim."

"That story's too long for me," said Revel. "Let's just test if you're right. Why don't we throw one of your artificial jellies into my cooler full of slime?"

"Good idea," Tug said, pleased to see Revel plunging headlong into the scientific method. They returned to the aquaria.

Tug mounted a stepladder festooned with bright-red anti-litigation safety warnings, and used a long-handled aquarium net to fetch up his best artificial jelly, a purple-striped piezoplastic sea nettle that he'd sintered up just that morning, a home-made, stingless *Chrysaora quinquecirrha.*

Revel and Tug strode out to the living room with the plastic sea nettle pulsating gamely against the fine-woven mesh of the net.

"Stand back," Tug warned and flipped the jelly into the four inches of Urschleim still in the plastic picnic cooler.

The slime heaved upward violently at the touch of the little artificial jellyfish. Once again Revel blew some Texan hot air into the goo, only this time it all lifted up at once, all five liters of it, forming a floating sea-nettle the size of a large dog.

Revel shouted. The Urschleim jelly drifted around the room, its white oral arms swaying like the train of a wedding dress.

"Yee haw! Shit howdy!" shouted Revel. "This one's different from all the Urschleim ones I've seen before. People'd buy this one just for fun! Edna's right. It'd be a hell of a pool toy, or, heck, a plain old land toy, as long as it don't fly away."

"A toy?" said Tug. "You think we should go with the recreational application? I like it, Revel! Recreation has positive energy. And there's a lot of money in gaming."

"Just like tag!" Revel hooted, capering. "Blind man's bluff!"

"Watch out, Revel!" One swaying fringe of the dog-sized ur-jelly made a sudden whipping snatch at Revel's leg. Revel yelped in alarm and tumbled backward over the living-room hassock.

"Christ! Get it off me!" Revel cried as the enormous jelly reeled at his ankle, its vast gelatinous bulk hovered menacingly over his upturned face. Tug, with a burst of inspiration, slid open the glass doors to the deck.

Caught in a draft of air, the jelly released Revel, floated out through the doors, and sailed off over Tug's redwood deck. Tug watched the dog-sized jelly ascending serenely over the neighbors' yard. Engrossed in beer and tofu, the neighbors failed to notice it.

Toatoa the parrot swooped off the roof of the Samoans' house and rose to circle the great flying sea nettle. The iridescent green parrot hung in a moment of timeless beauty near the translucent jelly, and then was caught by one of the lashing oral arms. There was a frenzy of green motion inside the Urschleim sea-nettle's bell, and then the parrot had clawed and beaked its way free. The Nettle lost a little altitude, but then sealed up its punctures and began again to rise. Soon it was a distant, glinting dot in the blue California sky. The moist Toatoa cawed angrily from her roof-top perch, flapping her wings to dry.

"Wow!" said Tug. "I'd like to see that again—on digital video!" He smacked his forehead with the flat of his hand. "But now we've got none left for testing! Except—wait!—that little bit in the vial." He yanked the vial from his pocket and looked at it speculatively. "I could put a tiny Monterey bell jelly in here, and then put in some nanophones to pick up the phonon jitter. Yeah. If I could get even a rough map of the Urschleim's basins of chaotic attraction—"

Revel yawned loudly and stretched his arms. "Sounds fascinatin', Doc. Take me on down to my motel, would you? I'll call Ditheree and get some more Urschleim delivered to your house by, oh, 6 A.M. tomorrow. And by day after tomorrow I can get you a lot more. A whole lot more."

Tug had rented Revel a room in the Los Perros Inn, a run-down stucco motel where, Tug told Revel as he dropped him off, Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe had once spent a honeymoon night.

Fearing that Tug harbored a budding romantic notion of a honeymoon night for himself, Revel frowned and muttered, "Now I know why they call this the Granola State: nuts, flakes, and fruits."

"Relax," said Tug. "I know you're not gay. And you're not my type anyway. You're way too young. What I want is a manly older guy who'll cherish me and take care of me. I want to snuggle against his shoulder and feel his strong arms around me in the still of the night." Perhaps the Etna Ale had gone to Tug's head. Or maybe the Urschleim had affected him. In any case, he didn't seem at all embarrassed to be making these revelations.

"See you tomorrow, old son," said Revel, closing his door.

Revel got on the phone and called the home of Hoss Jenks, the old forehand of the Ditheree field.

"Hoss, this is Revel Pullen. Can you messenger me out another pressure tank of that goo?"

"That goo, Revel, that goo! There's been big-ass balloons of it floatin' out of the well. You never should of thrown those gene-splice bacteria down there."

"I told you before, Hoss, it ain't bacteria we're dealing with, it's primeval slime!"

"Ain't many of us here that agree, Revel. What if it's some kind of plague on the oil wells? What if it spreads?"

"Let's stick to the point, Hoss. Has anybody noticed the balloons?"

"Not yet."

"Well, just keep folks off our property. And tell the boys not to be shy of firing warning shots—we're on unincorporated land."

"I don't know how long this can stay secret."

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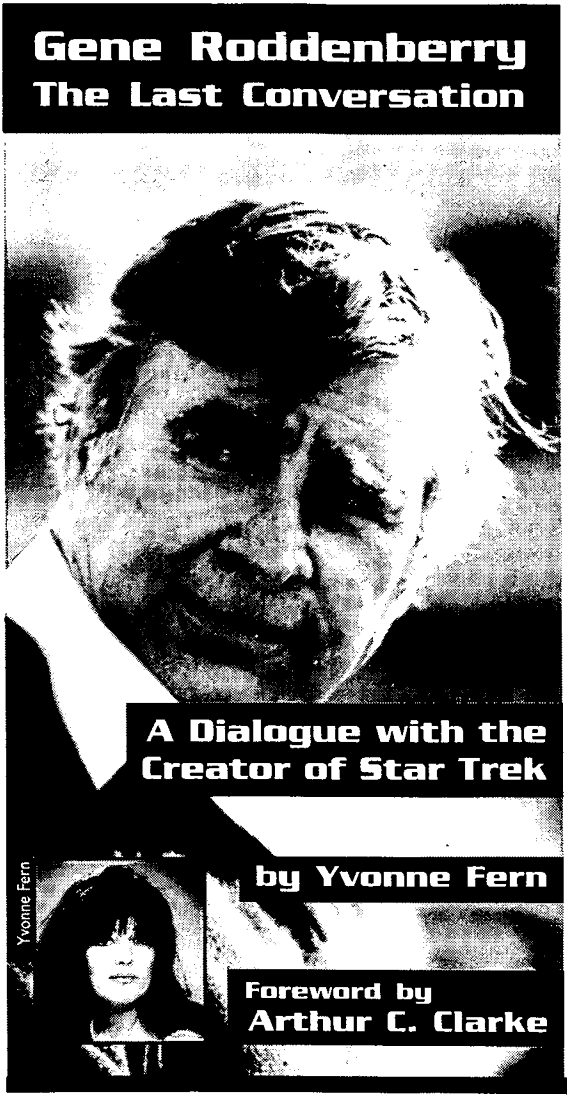

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"Hoss, we need time to try and find a way to make a buck off this. If I can get the right spin on the Urschleim, folks'll be *glad* to see it coming out of Ditheree. Just between you and me, I'm out here with the likeliest old boy to figure out what to do. Not that he's much of a *regular fella,* but that's neither here nor there. Name of Tug Mesoglea. I think we're onto something big. Send that tank of goo out to Mesoglea's address, pronto. Here it is. Yeah, and here's his number, and while we're at it, here's my number at the motel. And, Hoss, let's make that *three* tanks, the same size as the one you filled up for me yesterday. Yeah. Try and get 'em out here by six A.M. tomorrow. And start rounding out a Pullen pipeline connection between our Nacogdoches tank farm and Monterey."

"Monterey, California, or Monterrey, Mexico?"

"California. Monterey's handy and it's out of the way. We'll need some place real quiet for the next stage I'm planning. There's way too many professional snoops watching everybody's business here in Silicon Valley, drivin' around scanning cellular phones and stuff—you're receiving this call as encrypted, aren't you, Hoss?"

"Sure thing, boss. Got my Clipper Chip set to maximum scramble."

"Good, good, just making sure. I'm trying to be cautious, Hoss, just like Uncle Donny Ray."

Hoss gave a snort of laughter on the other end of the line, and Revel continued. "Anyhoo, we need someplace kind out of the way, but still convenient. Someplace with some spare capacity, but a little run-down, so's we can rent lots of square footage on the cheap and the city fathers don't ask too many prying questions. . . . Ask Lucy to sniff around and find me a place like that in Monterey."

"There's already hundreds of towns like that in Texas!"

"Yeah, but I want to do this out here. This deal is a software kind o' thing, so it's gotta be California."

Revel woke around seven A.M., stirred by the roar of the morning rush-hour traffic. He got his breakfast at a California coffee-shop that called itself "Southern Kitchen," yet served orange-rind muffins and sliced kiwi-fruits with the eggs. Over breakfast he called Texas, and learned that his assistant, Lucy, had found an abandoned tank farm near a defunct polluted military base just north of Monterey. The tank farm belonged to Felix Quinonez, who had been the base's fuel supplier. The property, on Quinonez's private land, included a large garage. The set-up sounded about perfect.

"Lease it, Lucy," said Revel, slurping his coffee. "And fax Quinonez two copies of the contract so's me and him can sign off down at his property today. I'll get this Tug Mesoglea fella to drive me down there. Let's say two o'clock this afternoon? Lock it in. Now has Hoss found a pipeline connection? He has? Straight to Quinonez's tanks? Bless you, honey. Oh, and one more thing? Draw up incorporation papers for a company called Ctenophore, Inc., register the company, and get the name trademarked. C–T–E–N–O–P–H–O–R–E. What it means? It's a kind of morphodite jellyfish. Swear to God. I learnėd it from Tug Mesoglea. If you should put Mesoglea's name on my incorporation papers? Are you teasin' me, Lucy? Are you tryin' to make ol' Revel mad? Now book me and Mesoglea a suite in a Monterey hotel, and fax the incorporation papers to me there. Thanks, darlin'. Talk to ya later."

The rapid-fire wheeling and dealing filled Revel with joy. Expansively swinging his arms, he strolled up the hill to Tug's house, which was only a few blocks off. The air was clear and cool, and the sun was a low bright disk in the immaculate blue sky. Birds fluttered this way and that—sparrows, grackles, robins, humming-birds, and the startlingly large California bluejays. A dog barked in the distance as the exotic leaves and flowers swayed in the gentle morning breeze.

As he drew closer to Tug's house, Revel could hear the steady screeching of the Samoans' parrot. And when he turned the corner of Tug's block, Revel saw something very odd. It was like there was a ripple in the space over Tug's house, an undulating bluish glinting of curved air.

Wheeling about in the midst of the glinting was the furious Toatoa. A school of small airborne bell jellies were circling around and around over Tug's house, now fleeing from and now pursuing the parrot, who was endeavoring, with no success, to puncture them. Revel yelled at the cloud of jellyfish, but what good would that do? You could as soon yell at a volcano or at a spreadsheet.

To Revel's relief, the parrot retreated to her house with a broken tailfeather, and the jellies did not follow her. But now—were the air bells catching the scent plume of the air off Revel's body? They flocked and spiraled eldritchly. Revel hurried up Tug's steps and into his house, right past the three empty cylinders of Urschleim lying outside Tug's front door.

Inside Tug's house reeked of subterranean sulfur. Air jellies of all kinds pressed this way and that. Sea nettles, comb-jellies, bell jellies, spotted jellies, and even a few giant siphonophores—all the jellies of different sizes, with the smaller ones beating frantically faster than the bigger ones. It was like a children's birthday party with lighter-than-air balloons. Tug had gone utterly bat-shit with the Urschleim.

"Hey, Tug!" Revel called, slapping a sea nettle away from his face. "What's goin' on, buddy? Is it safe in here?"

Tug appeared from around a corner. He was wearing a long blonde wig. His cheeks were high pink with excitement, and his blue eyes were sparkling. He wore bright lipstick, and a tight red silk dress. "It's a jelly party, Revel!"

A huge siphonophore shaped like a mustachioed rope of mucus came bumping along the ceiling toward Revel, its mane of oral arms soundlessly a-jangle.

"Help!"

"Oh, don't worry so," said Tug. "And don't beat up a lot of wind. Air currents are what excites them. Here, if you're scared, come down to my room while I slip into something less confrontational."

Revel sat on a chair in the corner of Tug's bedroom while Tug got back into his shorts and sandals.

"I was so excited when all that slime came this morning that I put on my dress-up clothes," Tug confessed. "I've been dancing with my equations for the last couple of hours. There doesn't seem to be any limit to the size of the jellyfish I can blow. We can make Urschleim jellyfish as big as anything!"

Revel rubbed his cheek uncertainly. "Did you figure anything more out about them, Tug? I didn't tell you before, but back at Ditheree we're getting spontaneous air jelly releases. I mean—I sure don't understand how the hell they can fly. Did you get that part yet?"

"Well, as I'm sure you know, the scientific word for jellyfish is 'coelenterate,' " said Tug, leaning toward the mirror to take off his lipstick. " 'Coelenterate' is from 'hollow gut' in Latin. Your average jellyfish has an organ called a *coelenteron,* which is a saclike cavity within its body. The reason these Urschleim fellows can fly is that somehow the Urschleim fill their coelenterons with, of all things, helium! Nature's noblest gas! Traditionally found seeping out of the shafts of oil wells!" Tug whooped, waggled his ass, and slipped off his wig.

Revel clambered angrily to his feet. "I'm glad you're having fun, Doc, but fun ain't business. We're in retail now, and like they say in retail, you can't do business from an empty truck. We need jellies. All stocks, all sizes. You ready to set up shop seriously?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean build product, son! I done called my man Hoss Jenkins at Ditheree, and we're gonna be ready to start pumping Urschleim cross-country by pipeline around noon our time tomorrow. That is, if you're man enough to handle the other end of the assembly line here in California."

"Isn't that awfully sudden?" Tug hedged, wiping off his mascara. "I mean, I do have some spreadsheets and business plans for a factory, but . . . "

Revel scoffed, and swatted at the jelly-stained leg of his Can't-Bust-'Ems. "Where have you been, Tug? This is the twenty-first century. Ain't you ever heard of just-in-time manufacturing? Hell, in Singapore or Taiwan they'd have already set up six virtual corporations and had this stuff shipped to global markets yesterday!"

"But I can't run a major manufacturing enterprise out of my house," Tug said, gazing around him. "Even my laser-sintering equipment is on a kind of, uhm, loan, from the University. We'll need lasers for making the plastic jellies to seed the big ones."

"I'll buy you lasers, Tug. Just give me the part numbers."

"But, but, we'll need workers. People to answer the phone, men to carry things . . . " Tug paused. "Though, come to think of it, we could use a simple Turing imitation program to answer the phones. And I know where we can pick up a few industrial robots to do the heavy lifting."

"Now you're talking sense!" Revel nodded. "Let's go on upstairs!"

"But what about the factory building?" Tug called after Revel. "We can't fit the business into my poor house. We'll need a lot of floor space, and a tank to store the Urschleim, with a pipeline depot nearby. We'll need a power hookup, an Internet node and—"

"And it has to be some outta-the-way locale," said Revel, turning to grin down from the head of the stairs. "Which I already leased for us this morning!"

"My stars!" said Tug. "Where is it?"

"Monterey. You're drivin'." Revel glanced around the living-room, taking in the odd menagerie of disparate jellyfish floating about. "Before we go," he cautioned, "You better close the door to your wood-stove. There's a passel of little air jellies who've already slipped out through your chimney. They were hassling your neighbor's parrot."

"Oh!" said Tug, and closed the wood-stove's door. The big siphonophore slimed its arms across Tug. Instead of trying to fight away, Tug dangled his arms limply and began hunching his back rhythmically—like a jellyfish. The siphonophore soon lost interest in him and drifted away. "That's how you do it," said Tug. "Just act like a jellyfish!"

"That's easier for you than it is for me," said Revel, picking up a twitching plastic moon jelly from the floor. "Let's take some of these suckers down to Monterey with us. We can use them for seeds. We can have like a tank of these moon jellies, some comb-jellies, a tank of sea nettles, a tank of those big street-loogie things over there—" he pointed at a siphonphone.

"Sure," said Tug. "We'll bring all my little plastic ones, and figure out which ones make the best Urschliem toys."

They set a sheet of plastic into the Animata's trunk, loaded it up with plastic jellyfish doused in seawater, and set off for Monterey.

All during the trip down the highway, Revel jabbered into his cellular phone, jolting various movers and shakers into action: Pullen family clients, suppliers and gophers, in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio—even a few discreet calls to Djakarta and Macao.

Quinonez's tank farm was just north of Monterey, squeezed up against the boundaries of what had once been Fort Ord. During their occupancy of these rolling dunes, the Army had so thoroughly polluted the soil that the land was now legally unusable. The base, which had been closed since the 1990s, was a nature preserve cum hazardous waste site. Those wishing to stroll the self-guiding nature trails were required to wear respirators and disposable plastic shoe-covers.

Tug guided the Animata along a loop road that led to the back of the Ord Natural Waste Site. Inland from the dunes were vast fields of brussels sprouts and artichokes. In one of the fields six huge silvery tanks rested like visiting UFOs.

"There it is, Tug," said Revel, putting away his phone. "The home of Ctenophore, Inc."

As they drew closer, they could see that the great storage tanks were marred with graffiti and pocked with rust. Some of the graffiti were richly psychedelic, but most were Aztec gang-code glyphs about red and blue, South and North, the numbers 13 and 14, and so on. The gangs' points of dispute grew ever more abstract.

Between the tanks and the road there was a vast gravel parking lot with yellowed thistles pushing up through it. At one side of the lot was a truly enormous steel and concrete garage, practically the size of an airplane hanger. Painted on the wall in fading electric pink, yellow, and blue was *Quinonez Motorotive—Max Nix We Fix!*

"Park here, Tug," said Revel. "Mr. Quinonez is supposed to show up and give us the keys."

"How did you get the lease lined up already?"

"What do you think I've been doing on the phone, Doc? Ordering pizza?"

They got out of the Animata, and stood there in the sudden, startling silence beneath the immense, clear California sky. In the distance a sputtering motor made itself heard, then pushed closer. Revel wandered back toward the nearest oil-tank and peered at it. Now the motor arrived in the form of a battered multicolored pickup truck driven by a rugged older man with iron gray hair and a heavy mustache.

"Hello!" sang Tug, instantly in love.

"Good afternoon," said the man, getting out of his pickup. "I'm Felix Quinonez." He stuck out his hand and Tug eagerly grasped it.

"I'm Tug Mesoglea," said Tug. "I handle the science, and my partner Revel Pullen over there handles the business. I think we're leasing this property from you?"

"I think so too," said Quinonez, baring his strong teeth in a flashing smile. He let go of Tug's hand, giving Tug a thoughtful look. An ambiguous look. Did Tug dare hope?

Now Revel came striding over. "Quinonez? I'm Revel Pullen. Did you bring the contract Lucy faxed you? Muy bueno, my man. Let's sign the papers on the hood of your pickup. Texas style!"

The ceremony completed, Quinonez handed over the keys. "This is the key to the garage, this is for the padlock on the pipeline valve, and these here are for the locks on the stairways up onto the tanks. We've been having some trouble keeping kids out of here."

"I can see that from the free paint-jobs you been getting," said Revel, staring over at the graffiti bedecked tanks. "But the rust I'm seeing is what worries me. The corrosion."

"These tanks have been empty and out of use for quite a few years," granted Quinonez. "But you weren't planning on filling them, were you? As I explained to your assistant, the hazardous materials license for this site was revoked the day Fort Ord was closed."

"I certainly *am* planning on filling these tanks," said Revel, "Or why the hell else would I be renting them? But the materials ain't gonna be hazardous."

"You're dealing in beet-sugar?" inquired Quinonez.

"Never you mind what's going in the tanks, Felix. Just show me around and get me up to speed on your valves and pipelines." He handed the garage key to Tug. "Here, Doc, scope out the building while Felix here shows me his system."

"Thanks, Revel. But Felix, before you go off with him, just show me how the garage lock works," said Tug. "I don't want to set off an alarm or something."

Revel watched disapprovingly while Tug walked over to the garage with Felix, chattering all the way.

"You must be very successful, Felix," gushed Tug as the leathery-faced Quinonez coaxed the garage's rusty lock open. Grasping for more topics to keep the conversation going, Tug glanced up at the garage's weathered sign. *"Motorotive,* that's a good word."

"A cholo who worked for me made it up," allowed Quinonez. "Do you know what *Max Nix We Fix* means?"

"Not really."

"My Dad was in the Army in the sixties. He was stationed in Germany, he had an easy deal. He was in the motor vehicle division, of course, and that was their slogan. *Max Nix* is German for 'it doesn't matter.' "

"How would you say *Max Nix* in Spanish?" inquired Tug. "I love Spanish."

"No problema," grinned Felix. Tug felt that there was definitely a good

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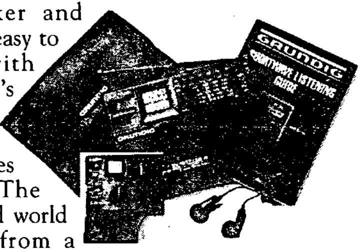

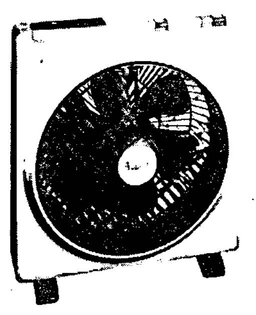

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vibration between them. Now the lock on the garage door squeaked open, and Felix held it open so that Tug could pass inside.

"The lights are over here," said Felix, hitting a bank of switches. The cavernous garage was like a vast barn for elephants—there were thirty vehicle-repair bays on either side like stalls; each bay was big enough to have once held a huge green Army truck.

"Hey, Quinonez," came Revel's holler. "I ain't got all day!"

"Thanks so much, Felix," said Tug, reaching out to the handsome older man for another handshake. "I'd love to see more of you."

"Well, maybe you will," said Felix softly. "I am not a married man."

"That's lovely," breathed Tug. The two made full eye contact. No problema.

Later that afternoon, Tug and Revel settled into a top-floor suite of a Monterey seaside hotel. Tug poured a few buckets of hotel ice onto the artificial jellyfish in his trunk. Revel got back into the compulsive wheeler-dealer mode with his portable phone again, his demands becoming more unseemly and grandiose as he and Tug worked their way, inch by amber inch, through a fifth of Gentleman Jack.

At three in the morning, Tug crashed headlong into bed, his last conscious memory the clink and scrape of Revel razoring white powder on the suite's glass-topped coffee-table. He'd hoped to dream that he was in the arms of Felix Quinonez, but instead he dreamed once again about debugging a jellyfish program. He woke with a terrible hangover.

Whatever substance Revel had snorted—it seemed unlikely to be anything so mundane and antiquated as mere cocaine—it didn't seem to be bothering him next morning. Revel lustily ordered a big breakfast from room-service.

As Revel tipped the busboy lavishly and splashed California champagne into their beaker of orange juice, Tug staggered outside the suite to the balcony. The Monterey air was rank with kelp. Large immaculate seagulls slid and twisted along the sea-breeze updrafts at the hotel's walls. In the distance to the north, a line of California seals sprawled on a rocky wharf like brown slugs on broken concrete. Dead tin-roofed canneries lined the shore to the south, some of them retrofitted into tourist gyp-joints and discos, others empty and at near-collapse.

Tug huffed at the sea air until the vice-grip loosened at his temples. The world was bright and chaotic and beautiful. He stumbled into the room, bolted down a champagne mimosa and three forkfuls of scrambled eggs.

"Well, Revel," he said finally, "I've got to hand it to you. Quinonez Motorotive is ideal in every respect."

"Oh, I've had Monterey in mind since the first time we met here at SIGUSC," Revel admitted, propping one boot-socked foot on the tabletop.

"I took to this place right away. This is my kind of town." With his lean strangler's mitts folded over his shallow chest, the young oilman looked surprisingly at peace, almost philosophical. "You ever read any John Steinbeck, Tug?"

"Steinbeck?"

"Yeah, the Nobel-Prize-winning twentieth-century novelist."

"I never figured you for a reading man, Revel."

"I got into Steinbeck's stuff when I first came to Monterey," Revel said. "Now I'm a big fan of his. Great writer. He wrote a book set right here in Cannery Row . . . you ever read it? Well, it's about all these drunks and whores living on the hillsides around here, some pretty interesting folks, and the hero's this guy who's kind of their mentor. He's an ichthyologist who does abortions on the side. Not for the money though, just because it's the 1940s and he likes to have lots of sex, and abortion happens to be this thing he can hack 'cause of his science background. . . . Y'see, Tug, in Steinbeck's day, Cannery Row actually canned a hell of a lot of fish! Sardines. But all the sardines vanished by 1950. Some kind of eco-disaster thing; the sardines never came back at all, not to this day." He laughed. "So you know what they sell in this town today? Steinbeck."

"Yeah, I know," said Tug. "It's kind of a postmodern culture-industry museum-economy tourist thing."

"Yeah. Cannery Row cans Steinbeck now. There's Steinbeck novels, and tapes of the crappy movie adaptations, and Steinbeck beer-mugs, and Steinbeck key-chains, Steinbeck bumper-stickers, Steinbeck iron-on patches, Steinbeck fridge-magnets . . . and below the counter, there's Steinbeck blow-up plastic love-dolls so that the air-filled author of *Grapes of Wrath* can be subjected to any number of unspeakable posthumous indignities."

"You're kidding about the love-dolls, right?"

"Heck no, dude! I think what we ought to do is buy one of 'em, blow it up, and throw it into a cooler full of Urschleim. What we'd get is this big Jell-O Steinbeck, see? Maybe it'd even *talk!* Like deliver a Nobel Prize oration or something. Except when you go to shake his hand, the hand just snaps off at the wrist like a jelly polyp, a kind of dough-lump of dead author flesh, and floats through the air till it hits some paper and starts writing sequels. . . ."

"What the hell was that stuff you snorted last night, Revel?"

"Bunch of letters and numbers, old son. Seems like they change 'em every time I score."

Tug groaned as if in physical pain. "In other words you're so fried, you can't remember."

Revel, jolted from his reverie, frowned. "Now, don't go Neanderthal on me, Tug. That stuff is pure competitive edge. You wouldn't act so shocked about it, if you'd spent some time in the boardrooms of the Fortune 500 lately. Smart drugs!" Revel coughed rackingly and laughed again. "The coolest thing about smart drugs is, that if they even barely work, you just *gotta* take 'em, no matter how square you are! Otherwise, the Japanese CEOs kick your ass!"

"I think it's time to get some fresh air, Revel."

"How right you are, hombre. We gotta settle in at Quinonez's tank farm this morning. We've got a Niagara of Urschleim headed our way." Revel glanced at his watch. "Fact is, the stuff oughta be rollin' in a couple of hours from now. Let's go on down and get ready to watch the tanks fill up."

"What if one of the tanks splits open?"

"Then I expect we won't use that particular tank no more."

When Tug and Revel got to Quinonez Motorotive, they found several crates of newly delivered equipment waiting for them. Tug was as excited as Christmas morning.

"Look, Revel, these two boxes are the industrial robots, that box is the supercomputer, and this one here is the laser-sintering device."

"Yep," said Revel. "And over here's a drum of those piezoplastic beads and here's a pallet of titaniplast sheets for your jellyfish tanks. You start gettin' it all set up, Doc, while I check out the pipeline valves one more time."

Tug unlimbered the robots first. They were built like short squat humanoids, and each came with a telerobotic interface that had the form of a virtual reality helmet. The idea was that you put on the helmet and watched through the robot's eyes, meanwhile talking the robot through some repetitive task that you were going to want it to do. The task in this case was to build jellyfish tanks by lining some of the garage's big truck bays with titaniplast—and to fill up the tanks with water.

The robot controls were of course trickier than Tug had anticipated, but after an hour or so he had one of them slaving away like the Sorcerer's Apprentice. He powered up the second robot and used it to bring in and set up the new computer and the laser-sintering assemblage. Then he crossloaded the first robot's program onto the second robot, and it too got to work turning truck-bays into aquaria.

Tug configured the new computer and did a remote login to his workstation back in Los Perros. In ten minutes he'd siphoned off copies of all the software he needed, and ghostly jellyfish were shimmering across the computer's new screen. Tug went out and looked at the robots; they'd finished five aquaria now, and water was gushing into them from connections the busy robots had made to the Quinonez Motorotive water-main.

Tug opened the trunk of his car and began bringing in artificial jellyfish and throwing them into the new tanks. Meanwhile Revel was moving about on the big storage tanks, crawling all over them like an excited fly on fresh meat. Spotting Tug, Revel whooped and waved from the top of a tank. "The slime's comin' soon," hollered Revel. Tug waved back and returned to his computer.

Checking his e-mail, Tug saw that he'd finally gotten a coelenteratological monograph concerning one of the ctenophores he'd been most eager to model: the *Venus's-girdle,* or *Cestus veneris,* a comb-jelly native to the Mediterranean, shaped like a wide, tapering belt covered with cilia. The Venus's-girdle was a true ctenophore, and its water-combing cilia were said to diffract sunlight into gorgeous rainbows. It might be fun to wrap one of them around your waist for dress-up. Ctenophore, Inc., could make fashion accessories as well as toys! Smiling as he worked, Tug began transferring the report's data to his design program.

The roar of the Urschleim coming through the pipeline was like a subway underground. Initially taking it for an earthquake, Tug ran outside and collided with the jubilant Revel.

"Here she comes, pardner!"

The nearest of the giant tanks boomed and shuddered as the slime began coursing into it. "So far, so good!" said Revel.

Tanks two and three filled up uneventfully, but a long vertical seam midway up on tank four began to gape open as the tank was filling. Scampering about like a meth-biker roughneck, Revel yanked at the pipeline valves and diverted the Urschleim flow from tank four into tanks five and six, which tidily absorbed the rest of the shipment.

As the roaring and booming of the pipeline delivery died down, the metal of tank four gave a dying shriek and ripped open from top to bottom. Floundering in vast chaotic motion, the sides of the great tank unrolled to fall outward like a snipped ribbon, tearing loose from the huge disk top, which glided forward some twenty yards like a giant Frisbee.

An acre or more of slime gushed out of the burst tank to flood the tank farm's dry weedy soil. The thousands of gallons of glistening Urschleim mounded up on the ground like a clear tapioca pudding.

Tug started running toward the spill, fearful for Revel's safety. But, no, there was Revel, standing safe off to one side like a triumphant cockroach. "Come on, Tug!" he called. "Come look at this!" Tug kept running and Revel met him at the edge of the Urschleim spill.

"This is just like the spill at Ditheree!" exclaimed Revel. "But you'll see, spillin' Urschleim on the ground don't mean a thing. You ready to start fillin' orders, Tug?" His voice sounded tinny and high, like the voice of an indestructible cartoon character.

"The stuff is warm," said Tug, leaning forward to feel the great knee-high pancake of Urschleim. His voice too had a high, quacking quality. Here and there fat bubbles of gas formed beneath the Urschleim and burst plopping holes in it. The huge Urschleim flapjack was giving off gas like a dough full of yeast. But the gas was helium, which is why their voices were high and—

"I just realized how the Urschleim makes helium," squawked Tug. "Cold fusion! Let's run back in the garage, Revel, and find out whether or not we've got radiation sickness. Come on. I mean it. Run!"

Back in the garage they caught their breath for awhile. "Why would we have radiation sickness?" puffed Revel finally.

"I think your Urschleim is fusing hydrogen atoms together to make helium," said Tug. "Depending on the details of the process, that could mean anything from warming the stuff up, to killing everyone in the county."

"Well, it ain't killed anyone down in Ditheree so far," Revel scoffed. "And come to think of it, one of my techs did check the first batch over with a Geiger counter. It ain't radioactive, Tug. How could it be? We're gonna use it to make toys!"

"Toys? You've already got orders?"

"I got a fella owns a chain of variety stores down in Orange County, wants ten thousand jellies to sell for swimming-pool toys. All shapes and sizes. I told him I'd send 'em out down the pipeline to his warehouse early tomorrow morning. He's takin' out ads in tomorrow's papers."

"Heavens to Betsy!" exclaimed Tug. "How are we going to pull that off?"

"I figure all you need to do is tap off Urschleim a bucketful at a time, and just dip one of your artificial jellyfish into each bucketful. The ur-snot will glom right onto the math and start acting like a jellyfish. You sell the slime jellyfish, and keep the plastic jellyfish to use as a seed again and again."

"We're going to do that ten thousand times by tomorrow morning?"

"Teach the damn robots to do it!"

Just about then, Felix Quinonez showed up in his truck to try and find out what they'd just spilled out of tank four. Revel blustered at him until he went away, but not before Tug managed to set a dinner date for that evening.

"Jesus, Tug," snapped Revel. "What in hell you want to have supper with that old man for? I hope to God it ain't because of—"

"Hark," sang Tug. "The love that dare not speak its name! Maybe I can get myself a Venus's-girdle sintered up in time. I think it would be a stunning thing to wear. The Venus's-girdle is a ctenophore native to the Mediterranean. If I can make mine come out anywhere near as gorgeous as the real thing, then we'll sell *twenty* thousand of them to your man in Orange."

Revel nodded grimly. "Let's git on in the garage and start workin', son."

They tried to get the robots to help with making the ten thousand jellies, but the machines were slow and awkward at this task. Tug and Revel set to work making the jellies themselves—tapping off Urschleim, vivifying it with the magic touch of a plastic jellyfish, and throwing the Urschleim jellyfish into one of the aquaria for storage. They put nets over the storage aquaria to keep the creatures from floating off. Soon the nets bulged upward with a dizzying array of Urschleim coelenteroids.

When dinner time rolled around, Tug, to Revel's displeasure, excused himself for his date with Felix Quinonez.

"I'll just work on through," yelled Revel. "I *care* about business, Tug!"

"I'll check back with you around midnight."

"Fine!" Revel drew out his packet of white powder and inhaled deeply. "I can go all night, you lazy heifer!"

"Don't overwork yourself, Revel. If we don't finish all the jellyfish tonight we can finish them early tomorrow morning. How many do we have done anyway?"

"I'm counting about three thousand," said Revel. "Damn but those robots are slow."

"Well, I'll be back later to drive you back to the hotel. Don't do anything crazy while I'm gone."

"You're the one who's crazy, Tug!"

Tug's dinner with Felix Quinonez went very well, even though Tug hadn't had time to sinter himself that Venus's-girdle. After the meal they went back to Felix's house and got to know each other better. The satiated Tug dropped off to sleep, and by the time he got back to the tank farm to pick up Revel, it was nearly dawn.

A stiff breeze was blowing from the south, and a dying moon hung low in the west over the sea. Patches of fog swept northward across the moon's low disk. The great tanks of Urschleim were creaking and shivering. Tug opened the garage door to find the whole interior space filled with Urschleim jellies. Crouched cackling at one side of the garage was the wasted Revel. Streaming out of five jury-rigged pipes next to Revel were unbreakable fresh Urschleim jellyfish; blowing out of the pipes like bubbles from a magic bubble wand. Every now and then an air-bubble would start to swell too large before plopping free, and one of the two robots would step forward and snip it off.

"Reckon we got enough, yet, Tug?" asked Revel. "I done lost count."

Tug did a quick estimation of the volume of the garage divided by the volume of an air-jelly and came up with two hundred thousand.

"Yes, Revel, I'm sure that's way more than enough. Stop it now. How did you get around having to dip the plastic jellyfish into the slime?"

"The smart nose knows," said Revel, horning up a thumbnail of white powder. "How was your big date?"

"My date was fine," said Tug, pushing past Revel to turn off the valves on the five pipes. "It could even be the beginning of a steady thing. Thank God this garage isn't wood, or these air jellies would lift off the roof. How are you going to feed them all into the pipeline to Orange County, Revel?"

"Got the robots to rig a collector up top there," said Revel, gesturing toward the distant ceiling. "You think it's time to ship 'em out? Can do!" Revel slapped a large toggle switch that one of the robots had jury-rigged into the wall. The deep throb of a powerful electric pump began.

"That's good, Revel, let's get the jellies out of here. But you still didn't tell me how you got the jellies to come out of the pipe all ready-made." Tug paused and stared at Revel. "I mean how could they come out ready-made without your having to dip a plastic jellyfish in them. What did you do?"

"Hell, I can tell by your face you already know the answer," snapped Revel defensively. "You want to hear it? Okay, I went and put one of your goddamn precious plastic jellies in each of the big tanks. Same idea as back at Ditheree. Once the whole tank's got your weird math in it, the pieces that bubble out form jellies naturally. We got sea nettles in tank number one, moon jellies in number two, those spotted jellies in tank three, bell jellies in tank five, and ctenophores in tank six. Comb-jellies. Tank four's busted, you recall."

"Busted," said Tug softly. Outside the screeching of metal rose above the sighing of the wind and the chug of the pipeline pump that was sucking the garage's jellies off the ceiling and pipelining them off to Orange County. "Busted."

A huge crash sounded from the tank field.

Tug helped the disoriented Revel out into the driveway in front of the garage. Tank number six was gone, and a spindle-shaped comb-jelly the size of a blimp was bouncing across the sloping field of artichoke plants that lay north of the tank farm. The great moving form was live and shiny in the slanting moonlight. Its transparent flesh glowed faintly from the effects of cold fusion.

"The other tanks are going to break up, too, Revel," Tug murmured. "One by one. It's the helium."

"Them giant air jellies are gonna look plumb beautiful when the sun comes up," said Revel, squinting at his watch. "It'll be great publicity for Ctenophore, Inc. Did I tell you I got the papers for it drawn up?"

"No," said Tug. "Shouldn't I sign them?"

"No need for you to sign, old son," said Revel. "The Urschleim's mine, and so's the company. I'm putting you on salary! You're our chief scientist!"

"God damn it, Revel, don't play me for a sucker. I wanted stock. You knew that."

A dark figure shuffled up behind them and tapped Revel's shoulder with its metal claw. It was one of the industrial robots, carrying Revel's portable phone.

"There's a call on your phone, Mr. Pullen. From Orange County. You set the phone down earlier while you were ingesting narcotics."

"Busy, busy!" exclaimed Revel. "They must be wantin' to transfer payment for our shipment. We're in business, Tug, my man. And just to make sure there's no hard feelings, I'll pay your first year's salary in advance! Tomorrow, that is."

As Revel drew out his portable phone, another of the great metal tanks gave way, releasing a giant, toadstool-like spotted jelly. Outlined against the faint eastern sky, it was an awesome sight. The wind urged the huge quivering thing northward, and its great stubby tentacles dragged stubbornly across the ground. Tug wished briefly that Revel were screaming in the jelly's grip instead of screaming into his telephone.

"Lost 'em?" Revel said screeching. "What the hell you mean? We shipped 'em to you, and you owe us the money for 'em. Your warehouse roof blew off? That's not my fault, is it? Well, yes, we did ship some extras. Yes, we shipped you twenty to one. We figured you'd have a high demand. So that makes it our fault? Kiss my grits!" He snapped the phone shut and scowled.

"So all the jellies in Orange County got away?" said Tug softly. "It's looking kind of bad for Ctenophore, Inc., isn't it, Revel? It's going to be tough to run that operation *alone."* With a roar, a third storage tank gave way like a hatching egg, releasing a moon jelly the size of an ice-skating rink. The first rays of the rising sun shimmered on its great surface. In the distance there were sirens.

In rapid succession the two remaining tanks burst open, unleashing a bell jelly and a mammoth sea nettle. A vagary of the dawn breeze swept the sea nettle toward Tug and Revel. Instead of fleeing it, Revel ran crazily toward it, bellowing in mindless anger.

Tug watched Revel for a moment too long, for now the huge sea nettle lashed out two of its dangling oral arms and snagged the both of them. Swelling its hollow gut a bit larger, the vast sea nettle rose a few hundred feet into the air, and began drifting north along Route One toward San Francisco.

By swinging themselves around and climbing frenziedly, Tug and Revel were able to find a perch together in the tangled tissues on the underside of the enormous sea nettle. The effort and the clear morning air seemed finally to have cleared Revel's head.

"We're lucky these things don't sting, eh, Doc? I gotta hand it to you. Say, ain't this a hell of a ride?"

The light of the morning sun refracted wonderfully through the giant lens-like tissues of the helium-filled sea nettle.

"I wonder if we can steer it?" said Tug, feeling around in the welter of dangling jelly frills all around them. "It'd be pretty cool to set down at Crissy Field right near the Golden Gate Bridge."

"If anyone can steer it, Tug, you're the man."

Using his knowledge of the jelly's basins of chaotic attraction, Tug was indeed able to adjust the giant sea nettle's pulsings so as to bring them to hover over Crissy Field's great grassy sward, right at the mouth of the San Francisco Bay, first making a low pass over the hilly streets of San Francisco. Below were thousands of people, massed to greet them.

They descended lower and lower, surrounded by a buzzing pack of TV-station helicopters. Anticipating a deluge of orders for Ctenophore products, Revel phoned up Hoss Jenkins to check his Urschleim supply.

"We've got more goo than oil, Revel," shouted Hoss. "It's showin' up in all our wells and in everybody else's wells all across Texas. Turns out there wasn't nothing primeval about your slime at all. It was just a mess of those gene-splice bacteria like I told you all along. Them germs have floated down from the air jellies and are eatin' up all the oil they can find!"

"Well, keep pumping that goo! We got us a global market here! We got cold fusion happening, Hoss! Not to mention airships, my man, and self-heating housing! And that probably ain't but the half of it."

"I sure hope so, Revel! Because it looks like all the oil business left in Texas is about to turn into the flyin' jelly business. Uncle Donny Ray's asking lots of questions, Revel! I hope you're prepared for this!"

"Hell yes, I'm prepared!" Revel snapped. "I spent all my life waitin' for a chance like this! Me 'n' ol' Tug are the pioneers of a paradigm-shatterin' postindustrial revolution, and anybody who don't like it, can get in the breadlines like those no-neck numbskulls from IBM." Revel snapped the phone shut.

"What's the news, Revel?" asked Tug.

"All the oil in Texas is turning into Urschleim," said Revel. "And we're the only ones who know what to do about it. Let's land this thing and start makin' us some deals."

The giant sea nettle hovered uneasily, rippling a bit in the prop-wash of the anxious helicopters. Tug made no move to bring them lower. "There's no *we* and no *us* as long as you're talking that salary bullshit," said Tug angrily. "If you want me to bust ass and take risks in your startup, it has to be fifty-fifty down the line. I want to be fully vested! I want to be on the board! I want to call my share of the shots!"

"I'll think about it," Revel hedged.

"You better think fast, Revel." Tug looked down between his legs at the jostling crowd below. "Look at them all. You don't really know how the hell we got here or what we're doing, Revel. Are you ready to face them alone? It's nice up here in this balloon, but we can't ride a balloon forever. Sooner or later, we're gonna have to walk on our own two feet again, and look people right in the eye." He reached up into the tissues of the giant sea nettle, manipulating it.

Now the sun-baked quake-prone ground began rising up steadily again. Tattooed local hipsters billowed away from beneath them in San Francisco's trademark melange of ecstasy and dread.

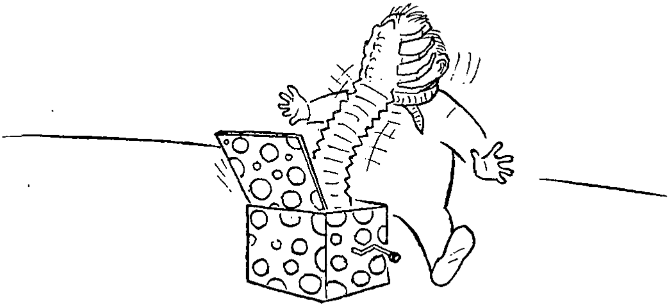
"What are you going to say to them when I land us?" demanded Tug harshly.

"Me?" Revel said, surprised. "You're the scientist! You're the one who's s'posed to explain. Just feed 'em some mathematics. Chaos equations and all that bullshit. It don't matter if they can't understand it. *'There's no such thing as bad publicity,'* Tug. P.T. Barnum said that."

"P.T. Barnum wasn't in the artificial life business, Revel."

"Sure he was," said Revel, as the great jellyfish touched down. "And, okay, what the hey, if you'll stick with me and do the talkin', I'll go ahead and cut you in for 50 percent."

Tug and Revel stepped from the jellyfish and shook hands, grinning gamely, in a barrage of exploding flashbulbs. ●



ALIEN-IN-THE-BOX

N. Downes

Richard Parks

LAYING THE STONES

Richard Parks is married to a poet and works as a Computer System Manager. His first short story sale was to Elinor Mavor's *Amazing Stories* in the early eighties. While "Laying the Stones" is only his second sale, he's just placed a third story with *SF Age*. Mr. Parks tells us that he sincerely hopes all this activity is the beginning of a long and healthy trend.

Illustration by Alfred Ramage

Ruins covered the island of Memnyre, gleaming white in the sun like the scavenged bones of a lion's feast. That was the sign the priest of Malitus had given Crucian—that and steer south by the Bow Star. He tacked against a slight headwind, then dropped his boomline and let his small craft glide the last few feet to bump against the stone pier. No one was there to greet the old fisherman; he expected no one. Crucian carefully removed all his supplies from the boat, finally taking the sail itself. Then he took the biggest stone he could lift, smashed the planking of his boat, and made himself watch it sink.

I will never leave this place.

If Crucian ever needed a reminder of that in what time he had left, it would lie here in three fathoms of water. Great undertakings required care, preparation, and commitment. Crucian knew he had the first two; here was proof of the third.

He found a grove of trees with a small freshwater spring on a hilltop close to one of the greater ruins. Crucian made a tent of the sailcloth and arranged his camp the best way he knew. The sun was an hour past setting when he was done and the old man was weary past belief, but, before he allowed himself sleep Crucian made his way to the nearest tumble of white marble and limestone and chose one perfect stone. He carried it halfway back to the campsite to a place where the grassy slope leveled for a moment, and there he began to build his altar.

God of Endings, see the first step that brings the last. May it speed your work.

The short prayer was all he had strength for. He crawled into his tent and waited impatiently for sleep.

That night Crucian dreamed of the day he did not visit his wife's grave. Instead, he left his boat and his nets unattended and returned to Darsa. He walked through the streets of the city looking for what he did not remember and could not name. Near nightfall he found himself sitting on a stone outside the west gate watching the color changes in the sunset.

"Friend, you look troubled."

The man was dressed as a priest; Crucian had seen that style of robe before. "You're an Ender."

The priest nodded, pleasantly. He was a little younger than Crucian, but not by much. His hair still had a touch of black remaining. Crucian patted the slim knife at his belt and the priest smiled at him. "You've heard of us. It's true—we do kill now and again when it serves our purpose," he admitted. "But we never lie, and I say I mean you no harm."

"What do you want?"

The priest shrugged. "I want what all Enders want. An end to Somna's dream, this corrupt nightmare that is the world. Now, friend: what do *you* want?"

"I don't know. Rest, perhaps."

"Perhaps we can find out together. I'm called Tyen. What is your name?"

Crucian started to say "Crucian," but stopped himself. That had not been his name, then. Crucian was the name the Enders gave him when he joined their sect the very next day. He tried to think of his other name, his first name, but the Initiation had taken it from him. One less tie to the goddess Somna's dream that was the corrupt, wicked world. One less shackle to stop him from doing what he needed to do.

One less dream.

Crucian knew he was dreaming, and the shock ended it. He came awake, stiff and sore on his blanket on the ground. As his eyes opened he got one blurry glimpse of a small, slim figure running through the trees. It disappeared in the morning mist.

Aversa!

At least one of the demons still lived. Skulking close; spying on his dreams. The priests of Malitus, God of Endings, were right once more. Crucian hurried to rise and get back to the great work.

As much as possible of each of Crucian's days were spent piling stone on stone. He would have used all the time he had doing that very thing, but his body and his will were of different opinions on the matter. When his arms grew tired and his fingers grew stiff and sore, he took that forced time to try to find the enemy.

He did not succeed.

Crucian did learn the placement and size of all the major ruins on the island. And, more important, he learned the lie they told.

Death.

That was the lie. The ruins were not bones, not the remnants of anything that had lived for a time and then passed into dust. He knew, because the ones who built wonders on Memnyre were there still. The old man felt their presence in every stone, in every shattered carving. But worst of all, he heard their voices. Especially at night.

Crucian tried not to. On a good day, when the pain in his chest and the ache in his joints drowned out the island's many voices, it was easy.

This was not going to be one of those days.

The old man knew as soon as he woke; time and necessity had made him adept at reading the signs: for one, the sun was clear and bright; it woke him with gentle warmth after a restful night—another bad sign. He spread his left hand experimentally, listening for the tell-tale grating of bone on bone. Nothing. He listened to his failing heart, found the rhythm steady and strong.

This day will not be kind to me, he thought. And knowing that, he still forced himself to rise, wash his face in a cold water stream, and set out to do his work. It was all part of the Trial, though in truth that made little difference. The God of Endings might guide but he did not choose; that was left to old men.

Crucian smiled to himself. *I will not be kind to this day.*

The old man went first to the stones; it was the best time to work, in the morning before the sun was high. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction at how well the altar was coming along. A few more days at this rate and it would be done.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO?

Crucian almost dropped the fine piece of polished marble that he had so carefully teased from under a fallen statue. He took a deep breath and slid it into place on the altar.

"You are an Aversa," he said aloud. It was the first time the voices had spoken to him directly; before now they had been as whispers, snatches overheard but with little sense to them.

YES.

"Masters of Lesser Dream and Illusion. Created first of all races by Somna, Goddess of the Greater Dream that is the World."

Silence, but then Crucian didn't need an answer to that. "A demon, in sum," he said. "I've come to destroy you."

AN ENDER.

It was Crucian's turn to be silent for a bit, then "You know of us?"

DOES THE BODY KNOW OF THE WOUND?

"The dream is the wound. The world is the wound. It festers, it corrupts, it sickens. We would heal it."

YOU WOULD DESTROY IT.

Crucian smiled. "It's the same thing."

NO.

The old man smiled. Let the demon test his faith; he didn't mind. Crucian knew about demons, called First Born and Aversa by those with less understanding. His own instruction by Brother Tyen and others he had supplemented by more study, and, recently, first-hand knowledge. *I could write a treatise,* he thought, *if I didn't have to die so soon.* The pride he felt at the idea had a deliciously sinful feel to it, but perhaps he could be forgiven. After all, the one contribution he *would* live to make was fated to pass unrecorded. No one would know except himself and the demon, and they were both doomed, each in their own fashion. That, not the dying, was the part that didn't seem fair.

Malitus will know.

That was certain, but not so very comforting to an old man nearing the end of his work.

"The altar to Malitus disturbs you," he said. "You cannot bear its presence here. The meaning it carries is like a knife in your heart."

YES.

"You are beloved of Somna. When you are gone, that is one less reason for Somna to remain in sleep."

YES.

"Good," Crucian said and he laid another stone in place.

When evening came he sat on a log by his fire; the silhouette of the altar was clearly visible on the hillside.

I'll lay the capstone on the altar tomorrow. That'll be the end of her.

"HER" HAS BEEN DEAD A LONG TIME, CRAZY MAN. SHE CAN'T DIE AGAIN.

He was almost relieved. The demon's voice was in his mind again, the odd cadences of someone—something, rather—not used to forming words. Crucian had to admit she was getting better. The words formed clearly now; he just didn't know what they meant.

"Riddles?" he asked aloud. "Is that how you will test my faith?"

I SPOKE NO RIDDLES. SHE IS DEAD. YOU WERE THERE. SHOULD KNOW.

The old man put some more wood on his fire and pushed back the darkness a little more. He couldn't see anything yet, but it was a little soon for that. Perhaps she would appear, with a little coaxing. He wanted to see what he had come to destroy. It made victory something more than abstract.

"For a dead Demon," he said, "you sound lively enough."

THIS ONE NEITHER DEAD NOR DEMON. WHO RIDDLES NOW?

Crucian frowned. "You just said—"

HER. THE ONE IN YOUR MIND WHEN YOU SAY "DEMON." THE ONE YOU HAVE COME TO DESTROY. IS DEMON HER NAME?

"You are the demon! There is no other!"

ONLY ONE, she agreed, BUT NOT THIS ONE.

He started to curse her but never got it out. A woman appeared just on the edge of the light; fire-shadows touched her face. She was young, young in the way that is always painful to old men, but that wasn't the source of the pain that nearly brought him to his knees—it was her eyes, and the two things he recognized there:

Knowledge was the first. She knew him, knew all the lies, postures, and self-serving delusions that came so very close to being all that he was. Fifty years, and he still hadn't escaped the cool grey certainties in her eyes. But even that cruelty wasn't the worst. That honor was reserved for a miracle.

Forgiveness.

She knew him, and the knowledge didn't matter. He'd called that love. She'd forgiven him that, too.

"Aphel . . . "

He blinked like a child awakened too soon. Or too late. *By the Dreaming Bitch, what have I done?!*

YOU SAID HER NAME.

Such a simple thing. But an old man with no past and only a single-minded determination in the present could not have known that name, could not have spoken it. *It doesn't belong to me. . . .*

BELONGS TO JARETH, A FISHERMAN FROM DARSA. THAT IS YOU.

The damage was complete. It wasn't bad enough that he'd given the demon his dead wife's name.

She'd given his own back to him.

"Damn you!"

The demon sat down on a broken pillar just within the ring of firelight. She kept the appearance of his dead wife Aphel, and as long as she did, he couldn't forget knowing her. Could not forget who he was. He fought back the fear and panic, tried not to let the demon see either. The familiar pain returned to his chest, but sharper now, less patient. He cried out, once, and one more traitor thought slipped away.

Trapped.

If the demon read Crucian's thought, she gave no sign. Crucian stared at the dying flames, tried to think, tried to make a plan. There wasn't enough wood to keep the fire going all night; the small branches and twigs he found nearby were soon exhausted. The demon had not moved; the failing light cast her more and more in shadow. Soon night would close in around them both, sleep would come and this time his dreams would be different—the old man's impenetrable *indifference* would not be there to protect him.

It was the only thing that kept her away.

The thought was like a sigh. NONSENSE. WAKING OR SLEEPING, YOU DREAMED. AND I WAS CONTENT TO LET YOU.

"That's a lie! I was strong!" he said.

She shook her head, slowly. IT WAS NOT STRENGTH THAT KEPT APHEL HIDDEN, JARETH FORGOTTEN.

Crucian looked about for something, anything he could use as a weapon. Everything had gone into the fire. "What, then?" he asked.

PAIN, SILLY MAN. PAIN SO OLD AND BURDENSOME THAT YOU COULD NO LONGER TELL WHERE IT ENDED AND THE

WORLD BEGAN. RIPE FRUIT FOR THE ENDERS. ARE ALL WHO WORSHIP THEIR OWN SORROW LIKE YOU?

"I serve Malitus, Demon," he said. His voice was like a child's.

YOU CONFUSE YOUR PAIN WITH THE WORLD'S PAIN. YOU WOULD STOP THE WORLD FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR OWN HURT.

"Lies!"

STILL YOU SLEEP. I WOULD SEE YOU AWAKE ONCE BEFORE WE DIE.

Crucian still didn't have a plan, but anger and fear made wonderful spurs. He raked the fading embers together just long enough to fire the charred end of one resinous branch. Holding his weak torch high, he set out for the rough heap of stones on the near hill, and on his way up he carried another piece of a fallen Aversa temple to add to the growing shrine.

It wasn't much to see, that last stone. Time and weather had stained its marble; the vines that overran it had found its small flaws and gouged them with tiny root fingers till its face was cracked and lined like Crucian's face, mirrored now in the old carved stone that lay just inches from where he'd fallen. The blood that so nearly choked him outright was beginning to dry at the corners of his mouth. He couldn't move his arms and legs, couldn't even shift his gaze from the final stone.

He smiled through the pain, and little dark flecks of dried blood fell to the ground. *All that I had wasn't enough.*

The last attack was quick; Crucian had no warning at all. One moment he was staggering toward the shrine carrying that final stone, the one that was the last, perfect piece of the puzzle, the one that would seal the unity of the shrine. The next he was on the ground and not really sure how he'd gotten there. Crucian was sure of one thing only—he wouldn't be getting up again.

Too much, too fast. Patience. I never did learn patience. . . .

The demon was there. He couldn't see her, and even her footsteps so very near sounded no louder than a soft breeze against the grass, but he knew she was there. She would have dropped the mask now; there was no longer any reason to pretend.

"Feel . . . feel free to gloat," he said, concentrating on each word, forcing it out. "I would have. Was looking forward to . . . "

The words spun away into darkness. In a moment the demon was beside him, rolling him over onto his back, straightening his contorted limbs. He tried to pull away from her but still couldn't move. He tried to spit and managed only to dribble down his chin. The sour smell of saliva and cooling blood almost made him retch. The demon took a bit of cloth and wiped his face clean.

He had no words now, no strength to use them. Crucian spoke in thought alone and saw another barrier between himself and the Firstborn go down. *Leave me alone!*

HOW CAN I DO THAT AND GLOAT, TOO?

Crucian blinked back the pain, tried to see the demon's face.

She was still Aphel.

I would have exulted in your defeat, Demon; I've admitted as much. I would have crowed and danced and capered like a madman till I dropped dead and finished this little play with just the proper touch of irony. I would not do to you what you're doing to me. I would not torture you.

The Aversa glanced at the stained cloth she still held. IT WAS SUCH A LITTLE KINDNESS. I MEANT NO INSULT.

Crucian laughed. It brought more blood, which triggered a fit of coughing that brought still more. His breaths came quicker, each one like the tick of an impatient clock. His smile faded slowly. *You may gloat now.*

It sounded like a plea.

She shook her head. I CANNOT. AND NEITHER COULD YOU.

Crucian saw the darkness rising to meet him. It seemed to flow upward from the earth itself, blinding him, muffling his thoughts in its profound nothingness. He still heard the demon in his mind, fainter now but still strong.

I WILL SHOW YOU.

Crucian had thought much about Death in his time on the island. He knew of its merciless impartiality, its inevitability. What he hadn't expected was fickleness.

Has Death left me?

It seemed so. The strength was back in his hands; the sweet final stone was in his hands. His stride was effortless and swift as he moved up the sunlit hill to the Shrine. He knew that he dreamed and did not care. The work would be complete. Trembling, he stepped closer to the ugly mound of stone that was so very beautiful.

This isn't right. . . .

He saw the change worked by the dream. The shrine was not the altar he had so painstakingly built. Now it was a rough mass of stones laid out in an oval, and the place for the final stone was near one end; Crucian saw the darkness in the hole waiting to be covered.

WHY DO YOU HESITATE?

Why, indeed?

He took the stone and stretched out his arms toward the last waiting void. A beam of sunlight reached into the darkness and showed him what lay within, waiting, as he himself was waiting, for the final stone.

That stone dropped from his hand and fell heavily to earth.

This isn't my shrine!

IT IS WHAT YOU CAME HERE TO DO, JARETH.

He shook his head. "A shrine," he croaked, "a shrine to Malitus. . . ."

A DREAM MAY DISGUISE, BUT IT NEVER LIES.

"Damn you! I will not bury Aphel again!"

YOU MADE A MOUNTAIN OF HER GRAVE AND COULD NOT BURY HER THE FIRST TIME. SHE DESERVES SOME PEACE NOW, JARETH. SO DO YOU.

"Go to hell!"

ARE YOU SO TIRED OF BEING THERE ALONE? THEN LAY THE STONE AND HAVE DONE WITH IT.

"No. . . . "

THERE IS LITTLE TIME, JARETH. FINISH IT.

"The shrine . . . "

THE GRAVE. BUT, IF IT'S EASIER FOR YOU, CALL IT WHAT YOU WILL. JUST FINISH IT.

"I am Crucian. I am completing the shrine." He took the stone and set it in place.

YOU ARE JARETH. YOU ARE BURYING YOUR DEAD.

"We shall see," the old man said.

The demon was no longer Aphel. She was a slim young girl with eyes large and golden.

WE SHALL.

The Aversa could not say what led her to tear down Crucian's shrine to build Jareth's grave. It was not just to remove the shrine, as she'd thought at first.

JARETH FINALLY MADE A GRAVE FOR APHEL. I THINK SHE WOULD DO THE SAME FOR HIM.

The Aversa was the weary remnant of an ancient race; she had been alone for a long time and was now alone again. In time she would forget the man buried there; his memory and his memories would both fade, but not just yet. Now the Aversa picked yellow and purple wildflowers that grew on the hillside and brought them as an offering to the stones. Now she allowed the memory of Aphel's face and form to live in her one last time, just long enough to kneel by the stones and say goodbye. ●

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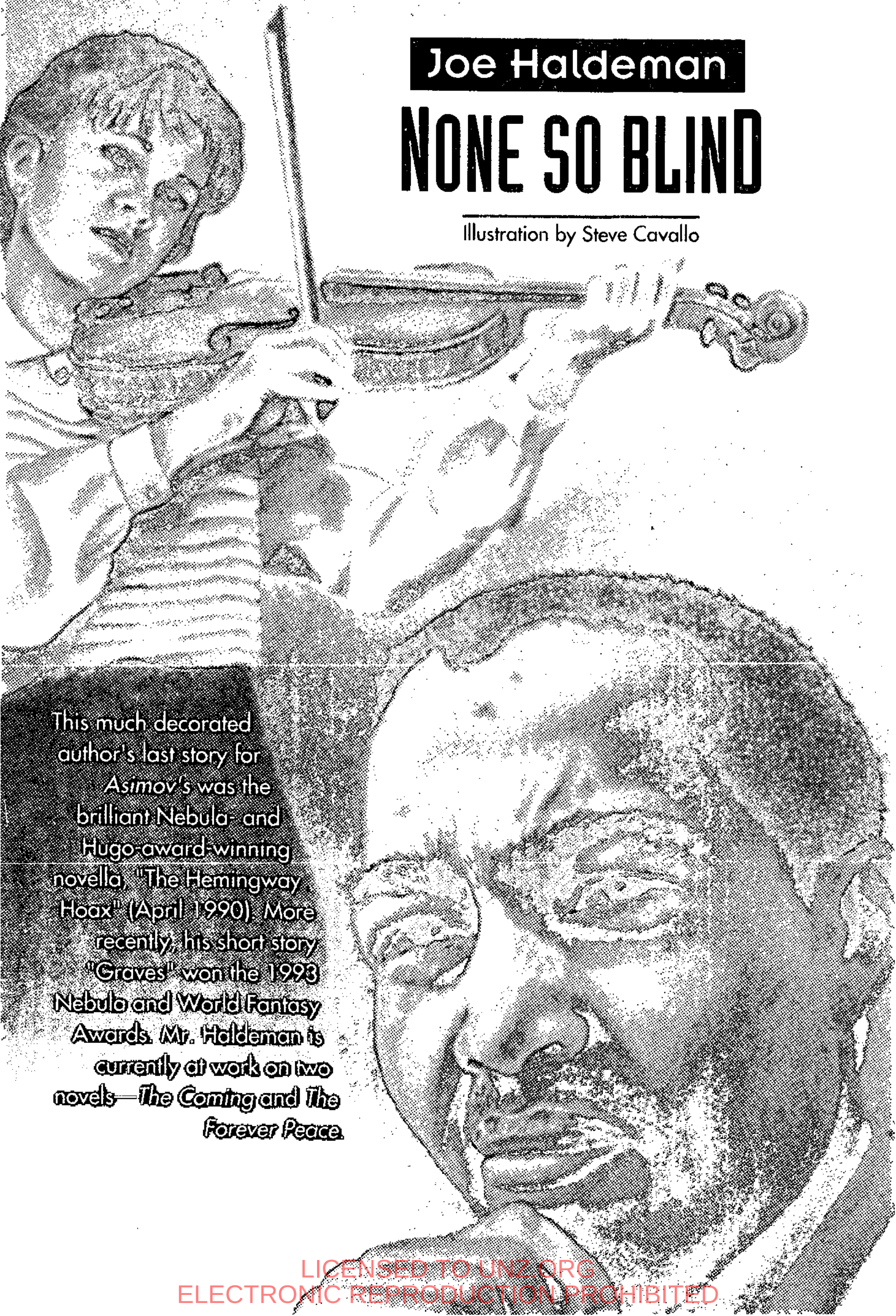
NONE SO BLIND

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



This much decorated author's last story for *Asimov's* was the brilliant Nebula- and Hugo-award-winning novella, "The Hemingway Hoax" (April 1990). More recently, his short story "Graves" won the 1993 Nebula and World Fantasy Awards. Mr. Haldeman is currently at work on two novels—*The Coming* and *The Forever Peace*.

It all started when Cletus Jefferson asked himself "Why aren't all blind people geniuses?" Cletus was only thirteen at the time, but it was a good question, and he would work on it for fourteen more years, and then change the world forever.

Young Jefferson was a polymath, an autodidact, a nerd literally without peer. He had a chemistry set, a microscope, a telescope, and several computers, some of them bought with paper route money. Most of his income was from education, though: teaching his classmates not to draw to inside straights.

Not even nerds, not even nerds who are poker players nonpareil, not even nerdish poker players who can do differential equations in their heads, are immune to Cupid's darts and the sudden storm of testosterone that will accompany those missiles at the age of thirteen. Cletus knew that he was ugly and his mother dressed him funny. He was also short and pudgy and could not throw a ball in any direction. None of this bothered him until his ductless glands started cooking up chemicals that weren't in his chemistry set.

So Cletus started combing his hair and wearing clothes that mismatched according to fashion, but he was still short and pudgy and irregular of feature. He was also the youngest person in his school, even though he was a senior—and the only black person there, which was a factor in Virginia in 1994.

Now if love were sensible, if the sexual impulse was ever tempered by logic, you would expect that Cletus, being Cletus, would assess his situation and go off in search of someone homely. But of course he didn't. He just jingled and clanked down through the Pachinko machine of adolescence, being rejected, at first glance, by every Mary and Judy and Jenny and Veronica in Known Space, going from the ravishing to the beautiful to the pretty to the cute to the plain to the "great personality," until the irresistible force of statistics brought him finally into contact with Amy Linderbaum, who could not reject him at first glance because she was blind.

The other kids thought it was more than amusing. Besides being blind, Amy was about twice as tall as Cletus and, to be kind, equally irregular of feature. She was accompanied by a guide dog who looked remarkably like Cletus, short and black and pudgy. Everybody was polite to her because she was blind and rich, but she was a new transfer student and didn't have any actual friends.

So along came Cletus, to whom Cupid had dealt only slings and arrows, and what might otherwise have been merely an opposites-attract sort of romance became an emotional and intellectual union that, in the next century, would power a social tsunami that would irreversibly transform the human condition. But first there was the violin.

Her classmates had sensed that Amy was some kind of nerd herself, as classmates will, but they hadn't figured out what kind yet. She was pretty fast with a computer, but you could chalk that up to being blind and actually needing the damned thing. She wasn't fanatical about it, nor about science or math or history or Star Trek or student government, so what the hell kind of nerd was she? It turns out that she was a music nerd, but at the time was too painfully shy to demonstrate it.

All Cletus cared about, initially, was that she lacked those pesky Y-chromosomes and didn't recoil from him: in the Venn diagram of the human race, she was the only member of that particular set. When he found out that she was actually smart as well, having read more books than most of her classmates put together, romance began to smolder in a deep and permanent place. That was even before the violin.

Amy liked it that Cletus didn't play with her dog and was straightforward in his curiosity about what it was like to be blind. She could assess people pretty well from their voices: after one sentence, she knew that he was young, black, shy, nerdly, and not from Virginia. She could tell from his inflection that either he was unattractive or he thought he was. She was six years older than him and white and twice his size, but otherwise they matched up pretty well, and they started keeping company in a big way.

Among the few things that Cletus did not know anything about was music. That the other kids wasted their time memorizing the words to inane top-40 songs was proof of intellectual dysfunction if not actual lunacy. Furthermore, his parents had always been fanatical devotees of opera. A universe bounded on one end by puerile mumblings about unrequited love and on the other by foreigners screaming in agony was not a universe that Cletus desired to explore. Until Amy picked up her violin.

They talked constantly. They sat together at lunch and met between classes. When the weather was good, they sat outside before and after school and talked. Amy asked her chauffeur to please be ten or fifteen minutes late picking her up.

So after about three weeks' worth of the fullness of time, Amy asked Cletus to come over to her house for dinner. He was a little hesitant, knowing that her parents were rich, but he was also curious about that life style and, face it, was smitten enough that he would have walked off a cliff if she asked him nicely. He even used some computer money to buy a nice suit, a symptom that caused his mother to grope for the Valium.

The dinner at first was awkward. Cletus was bewildered by the arsenal of silverware and all the different kinds of food that didn't look or taste like food. But he had known it was going to be a test, and he always did well on tests, even when he had to figure out the rules as he went along.

Amy had told him that her father was a self-made millionaire; his fortune had come from a set of patents in solid-state electronics. Cletus had therefore spent a Saturday at the University library, first searching patents and then reading selected texts, and he was ready at least for the father. It worked very well. Over soup, the four of them talked about computers. Over the calimari cocktail, Cletus and Mr. Linderbaum had it narrowed down to specific operating systems and partitioning schemata. With the Beef Wellington, Cletus and "Call-me-Lindy" were talking quantum electrodynamics; with the salad they were on an electron cloud somewhere, and by the time the nuts were served, the two nuts at that end of the table were talking in Boolean algebra while Amy and her mother exchanged knowing sighs and hummed snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan.

By the time they retired to the music room for coffee, Lindy liked Cletus very much, and the feeling was mutual, but Cletus didn't know how much he liked Amy, *really* liked her, until she picked up the violin.

It wasn't a Strad—she was promised one if and when she graduated from Juilliard—but it had cost more than the Lamborghini in the garage, and she was not only worth it, but equal to it. She picked it up and tuned it quietly while her mother sat down at an electronic keyboard next to the grand piano, set it to "harp," and began the simple arpeggio that a musically sophisticated person would recognize as the introduction to the violin showpiece *Méditation* from Massenet's *Thaïs.*

Cletus had turned a deaf ear to opera for all his short life, so he didn't know the back-story of transformation and transcending love behind this intermezzo, but he did know that his girlfriend had lost her sight at the age of five, and the next year—the year he was born!—was given her first violin. For thirteen years she had been using it to say what she would not say with her voice, perhaps to see what she could not see with her eyes, and on the deceptively simple romantic matrix that Massenet built to present the beautiful courtesan Thaïs gloriously reborn as the bride of Christ, Amy forgave her Godless universe for taking her sight, and praised it for what she was given in return, and she said this in a language that even Cletus could understand. He didn't cry very much, never had, but by the last high wavering note he was weeping into his hands, and he knew that if she wanted him, she could have him forever, and oddly enough, considering his age and what eventually happened, he was right.

He would learn to play the violin before he had his first doctorate, and during a lifetime of remarkable amity they would play together for ten thousand hours, but all of that would come after the big idea. The big idea—"Why aren't all blind people geniuses?"—was planted that very night, but it didn't start to sprout for another week.

Like most thirteen-year-olds, Cletus was fascinated by the human body, his own and others, but his study was more systematic than others' and, atypically, the organ that interested him most was the brain.

The brain isn't very much like a computer, although it doesn't do a bad job, considering that it's built by unskilled labor and programmed more by pure chance than anything else. One thing computers do a lot better than brains, though, is what Cletus and Lindy had been talking about over their little squids in tomato sauce: partitioning.

Think of the computer as a big meadow of green pastureland, instead of a little dark box full of number-clogged things that are expensive to replace, and that pastureland is presided over by a wise old magic shepherd who is not called a macroprogram. The shepherd stands on a hill and looks out over the pastureland, which is full of sheep and goats and cows. They aren't all in one homogenous mass, of course, since the cows would step on the lambs and kids and the goats would make everybody nervous, leaping and butting, so there are *partitions* of barbed wire that keep all the species separate and happy.

This is a frenetic sort of meadow, though, with cows and goats and sheep coming in and going out all the time, moving at about 3×10^8 meters per second, and if the partitions were all of the same size it would be a disaster, because sometimes there are no sheep at all, but lots of cows, who would be jammed in there hip to hip and miserable. But the shepherd, being wise, knows ahead of time how much space to allot to the various creatures and, being magic, can move barbed wire quickly without hurting himself or the animals. So each partition winds up marking a comfortable-sized space for each use. Your computer does that, too, but instead of barbed wire you see little rectangles or windows or file folders, depending on your computer's religion.

The brain has its own partitions, in a sense. Cletus knew that certain physical areas of the brain were associated with certain mental abilities, but it wasn't a simple matter of "music appreciation goes over there; long division in that corner." The brain is mushier than that. For instance, there are pretty well-defined partitions associated with linguistic functions, areas named after French and German brain people. If one of those areas is destroyed, by stroke or bullet or flung frying pan, the stricken person may lose the ability—reading or speaking or writing coherently—associated with the lost area.

That's interesting, but what is more interesting is that the lost ability sometimes comes back over time. Okay, you say, so the brain grew back—but it doesn't! You're born with all the brain cells you'll ever have. (Ask any child.) What evidently happens is that some part of the brain has been sitting around as a kind of back-up, and after a while the wiring gets rewired and hooked into that back-up. The afflicted person can say his name, and then his wife's name, and then "frying pan," and before you know it he's complaining about hospital food and calling a divorce lawyer.

So on that evidence, it would appear that the brain has a shepherd like the computer-meadow has, moving partitions around, but alas, no. Most of the time when some part of the brain ceases to function, that's the end of it. There may be acres and acres of fertile ground lying fallow right next door, but nobody in charge to make use of it—at least not consistently. The fact that it sometimes *did* work is what made Cletus ask "Why aren't all blind people geniuses?"

Of course there have always been great thinkers and writers and composers who were blind (and in the twentieth century, some painters to whom eyesight was irrelevant), and many of them, like Amy with her violin, felt that their talent was a compensating gift. Cletus wondered whether there might be a literal truth to that, in the micro-anatomy of the brain. It didn't happen every time, or else all blind people *would* be geniuses. Perhaps it happened occasionally, through a mechanism like the one that helped people recover from strokes. Perhaps it could be made to happen.

Cletus had been offered scholarships at both Harvard and MIT, but he opted for Columbia, in order to be near Amy while she was studying at Juilliard. Columbia reluctantly allowed him a triple major in physiology, electrical engineering, and cognitive science, and he surprised everybody who knew him by doing only moderately well. The reason, it turned out, was that he was treating undergraduate work as a diversion at best; a necessary evil at worst. He was racing ahead of his studies in the areas that were important to him.

If he had paid more attention in trivial classes like history, like philosophy, things might have turned out differently. If he had paid attention to literature he might have read the story of Pandora.

Our own story now descends into the dark recesses of the brain. For the next ten years the main part of the story, which we will try to ignore after this paragraph, will involve Cletus doing disturbing intellectual tasks like cutting up dead brains, learning how to pronounce cholecystokinin, and sawing holes in people's skulls and poking around inside with live electrodes.

In the other part of the story, Amy also learned how to pronounce cholecystokinin, for the same reason that Cletus learned how to play the violin. Their love grew and mellowed, and at the age of 19, between his first doctorate and his M.D., Cletus paused long enough for them to be married and have a whirlwind honeymoon in Paris, where Cletus divided his time between the musky charms of his beloved and the sterile cubicles of Institute Marey, learning how squids learn things, which was by serotonin pushing adenylate cyclase to catalyze the synthesis of cyclic adenosine monophosphate in just the right place, but that's actually the main part of the story, which we have been trying to ignore, because it gets pretty gruesome.

They returned to New York, where Cletus spent eight years becoming a pretty good neurosurgeon. In his spare time he tucked away a doctorate in electrical engineering. Things began to converge.

At the age of thirteen, Cletus had noted that the brain used more cells collecting, handling, and storing visual images than it used for all the other senses combined. "Why aren't all blind people geniuses?" was just a specific case of the broader assertion, "The brain doesn't know how to make use of what it's got." His investigations over the next fourteen years were more subtle and complex than that initial question and statement, but he did wind up coming right back around to them.

Because the key to the whole thing was the visual cortex.

When a baritone saxophone player has to transpose sheet music from cello, he (few women are drawn to the instrument) merely pretends that the music is written in treble clef rather than bass, eyeballs it up an octave, and then plays without the octave key pressed down. It's so simple a child could do it, if a child wanted to play such a huge, ungainly instrument. As his eye dances along the little fenceposts of notes, his fingers automatically perform a one-to-one transformation that is the theoretical equivalent of adding and subtracting octaves, fifths, and thirds, but all of the actual mental work is done when he looks up in the top right corner of the first page and says, "Aw hell. Cello again." Cello parts aren't that interesting to saxophonists.

But the eye is the key, and the visual cortex is the lock. When blind Amy "sight-reads" for the violin, she has to stop playing and feel the Braille notes with her left hand. (Years of keeping the instrument in place while she does this has made her neck muscles so strong that she can crack a walnut between her chin and shoulder.) The visual cortex is not involved, of course; she "hears" the mute notes of a phrase with her fingertips, temporarily memorizing them, and then plays them over and over until she can add that phrase to the rest of the piece.

Like most blind musicians, Amy had a very good "ear"; it actually took her less time to memorize music by listening to it repeatedly, rather than reading, even with fairly complex pieces. (She used Braille nevertheless for serious work, so she could isolate the composer's intent from the performer's or conductor's phrasing decisions.)

She didn't really miss being able to sight-read in a conventional way. She wasn't even sure what it would be like, since she had never seen sheet music before she lost her sight, and in fact had only a vague idea of what a printed page of writing looked like.

So when her father came to her in her thirty-third year and offered to buy her the chance of a limited gift of sight, she didn't immediately jump at it. It was expensive and risky and grossly deforming: implanting miniaturized video cameras in her eyesockets and wiring them up to stimulate her dormant optic nerves. What if it made her only half blind, but also blunted her musical ability? She knew how other people read music, at least in theory, but after a quarter-century of doing without the skill, she wasn't sure that it would do much for her. It might make her tighten up.

Besides, most of her concerts were done as charities to benefit organizations for the blind or for special education. Her father argued that she would be even more effective in those venues as a recovered blind person. Still she resisted.

Cletus said he was cautiously for it. He said he had reviewed the literature and talked to the Swiss team who had successfully done the implants on dogs and primates. He said he didn't think she would be harmed by it even if the experiment failed. What he didn't say to Amy or Lindy or anybody was the grisly Frankensteinian truth: that he was himself behind the experiment; that it had nothing to do with restoring sight; that the little video cameras would never even be hooked up. They were just an excuse for surgically removing her eyeballs.

Now a normal person would have extreme feelings about popping out somebody's eyeballs for the sake of science, and even more extreme feelings on learning that it was a husband wanting to do it to his wife. Of course Cletus was far from being normal in any respect. To his way of thinking, those eyeballs were useless vestigial appendages that blocked surgical access to the optic nerves, which would be his conduits through the brain to the visual cortex. *Physical* conduits, through which incredibly tiny surgical instruments would be threaded. But we have promised not to investigate that part of the story in detail.

The end result was not grisly at all. Amy finally agreed to go to Geneva, and Cletus and his surgical team (all as skilled as they were unethical) put her through three 20-hour days of painstaking but painless microsurgery, and when they took the bandages off and adjusted a thousand-dollar wig (for they'd had to go in behind as well as through the eyesockets), she actually looked more attractive than when they had started. That was partly because her actual hair had always been a disaster. And now she had glass baby-blues instead of the rather scary opalescence of her natural eyes. No Buck Rogers TV cameras peering out at the world.

He told her father that that part of the experiment hadn't worked, and the six Swiss scientists who had been hired for the purpose agreed.

"They're lying," Amy said. "They never intended to restore my sight. The sole intent of the operations was to subvert the normal functions of the visual cortex in such a way as to give me access to the unused parts of my brain." She faced the sound of her husband's breathing, her blue eyes looking beyond him. "You have succeeded beyond your wildest expectations."

Amy had known this as soon as the fog of drugs from the last operation had lifted. Her mind started making connections, and those connections made connections, and so on at a geometrical rate of growth. By the time they had finished putting her wig on, she had reconstructed the entire microsurgical procedure from her limited readings and conversations with Cletus. She had suggestions as to improving it, and was eager to go under and submit herself to further refinement.

As to her feelings about Cletus, in less time than it takes to read about it, she had gone from horror to hate to understanding to renewed love, and finally to an emotional condition beyond the ability of any merely natural language to express. Fortunately, the lovers did have Boolean algebra and propositional calculus at their disposal.

Cletus was one of the few people in the world she *could* love, or even talk to one-on-one, without condescending. His IQ was so high that its number would be meaningless. Compared to her, though, he was slow, and barely literate. It was not a situation he would tolerate for long.

The rest is history, as they say, and anthropology, as those of us left who read with our eyes must recognize every minute of every day. Cletus was the second person to have the operation done, and he had to accomplish it while on the run from medical ethics people and their policemen. There were four the next year, though, and twenty the year after that, and then 2000 and 20,000. Within a decade, people with purely intellectual occupations had no choice, or one choice: lose your eyes or lose your job. By then the "secondsight" operation was totally automated, totally safe.

It's still illegal in most countries, including the United States, but who is kidding whom? If your department chairman is secondsighted and you are not, do you think you'll get tenure? You can't even hold a conversation with a creature whose synapses fire six times as fast as yours, with whole encyclopedias of information instantly available. You are, like me, an intellectual throwback.

You may have a good reason for it, being a painter, an architect, a naturalist, or a trainer of guide dogs. Maybe you can't come up with the money for the operation, but that's a weak excuse, since it's trivially easy to get a loan against future earnings. Maybe there's a good medical reason for you not to lie down on that table and open your eyes for the last time.

I know Cletus and Amy through music. I was her keyboard professor once, at Juilliard, though now of course I'm not smart enough to teach her anything. They come to hear me play sometimes, in this rundown bar with its band of ageing firstsight musicians. Our music must seem boring, obvious, but they do us the favor of not joining in.

Amy was an innocent bystander in this sudden evolutionary explosion. And Cletus was, arguably, blinded by love.

The rest of us have to choose which kind of blindness to endure. ●

CHANGING

Behind me the city
stumbles in the dark
its towering faces
of grief shaded
and the angle of the moon
all wrong

When I was small
a man gave me a dollar
because of all my freckles
"You are kissed by angels," he said

Kissed and kissed I was
thinking of iridescent down
wings holding back the wind
their golden eyes
their melting laughter

Until one day their true god came
tufted, furred
his towering face
of grief shaded
and the angle of the teeth
all wrong

—Wendy Rathbone

VIEWPOINT

" IN THE TRADITION..."

A Cruise Through the Hard Fantasy Archipelago in Search of the Lonely and the Rum, Fairies in the Garden, the Semiotics of Alchemy, Industrial Wombs, a John Deere Tractor, Dueling Witches, Broken Trilogies, Creatures from the Jungian Depths, Elegant Sex, the Beast Jasconius, Big Shoes and Bigger Bridges, Wine in Lost Amphorae, a Stylish Death, the Reinvention of Language, and the Mad Apotheosis of Rhetoric

by Michael Swanwick

And so we set sail.

The green hills and haunted mountains of Middle Earth sink into the sea behind us. They are beauteous and filled with wonder, but already our attention is elsewhere. Our eyes strain ahead, searching for the mysterious islands that have called us away from our hearths and hobbit-holes, away from the comfortable and familiar. A fresh breeze parts the mists like curtains. The keel bites into iron-cold waters. Our ship leaps forward.

We are bound for the Fantasy Archipelago.

There was a time not many decades past when fantasy was not the prosperous marketing category it is today or even a marketing category at all. Indeed, fantasy of any description was as rare as griffins. Fantasy writers routinely dis-

Photo by M. C. Porter

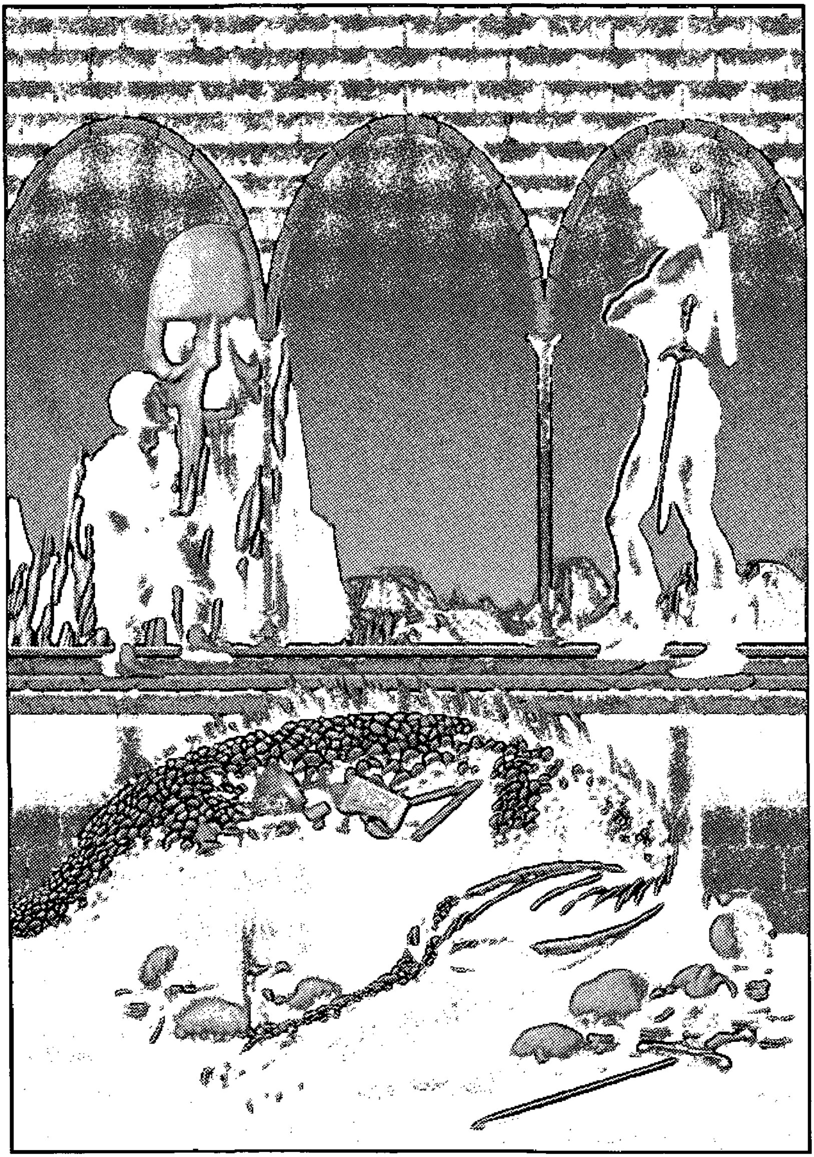


Illustration by George Krauter

guised their work as historicals or Arthuriana or (with the addition of a quickly forgotten spaceport or two) science fiction, or else they didn't get published at all.

J. R. R. Tolkien changed all that. The American paperbacks of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy hit the publishing industry with the force of revelation. They either created or demonstrated the existence of (accounts vary) an enormous audience for fantasy. They made a lot of money. Publishers, many of them perilously close to being entirely without a clue, scrambled to find something, anything, to fill this previously unsuspected appetite.

In the aftermath, there was a blurb often seen bannered above the title of that occasional fantasy hastily resurrected and thrown back into print by a bewildered editor who could think of no way else to describe it: IN THE TRADITION it read OF ROBERT E. HOWARD AND J. R. R. TOLKIEN!

At the time I thought this was the single worst description of a book ever attempted. Howard's and Tolkien's universes are, to understate the obvious, mutually exclusive. The image of that mighty-thewed barbarian, Conan, sometime yclept the Warrior, the Avenger, the Buccaneer, and the Conqueror, striding through the Shire to crush the settees and jeweled umbrella stands of the Sackville-Bagginses under his sandaled feet seemed to me irresistibly comic, the stuff of a Monty Python routine.

But age softens the hasty judgments of youth. A quarter-century later, I've come around to the side of that anonymous editorial drudge and decided he was right after all, that all my favorite works of fantasy are indeed In The Tradition of Robert E. Howard and J. R. R. Tolkien. Which is to say that they are each no more like the other than Gandalf the Grey is akin to Red Sonja. They are chimeras, *sui generis,* unique.

I'm going to write about what Tove Jansson called "the lonely and the rum," the unschoolable and ungroupable, those strange and shaggy literary creatures that have no ilk or kin and that mathematically can be contained in no set smaller than the set of all sets contained in no other sets. For ease of argument, I'm going to call this congeries of works *hard fantasy,* because I honestly believe that it holds a central place in its genre analogous to the place hard science fiction holds in SF.

Our voyage will be treacherous, for the waters are uncharted and by the very nature of our quest many an important work will be ignored entirely. It is possible, too, that we shall occasionally land on what only appears to be an island. These are Faerie isles, after all, and some that seem solid now may turn to whales or mist in the morning. But the danger is justified not only by the beauty and wonder of our destinations, but because these are the works that drive fantasy, the source and justification for the entire genre, the engine that burns at the heart of its star.

Which is not to imply that there is anything wrong with the mighty continents of High Fantasy or of Mannerism or of Celtic Twilight or of Urban Fantasy or even of Mainstream. Shakespeare is a fine fellow in his place. But his place is not here.

The image of that mighty-thewed barbarian, Conan . . . striding through the Shire to crush the . . . jeweled umbrella stands of the Sackville-Bagginses . . . seemed to me irresistably comic.

White water hisses in our wake. From the crow's nest our elven lookout cries in a voice high and clear as that of a seabird. Everyone not engaged with the ropes or rudder rushes to the starboard rail to follow his pointing finger. Land!

Rising from the water before us are a triplet of isles: E. R. Eddison's Zimiamvian trilogy, *Mistress of Mistresses, A Fish Dinner in Memison,* and *The Mezentian Gate. The Worm Ouroboros,* often represented as being the first book in the sequence, is seriously flawed, only peripherally related, and is best read last, as a mantissa. The trilogy itself, however, is strong drink for connoisseurs of highly wrought prose. Eddison was a British career civil servant and these books contain the world he would rather have been born into, an alchemical marriage of the Renaissance and Middle Ages as they should have been, compounded of great passions, Elizabethan rhetoric, and genuine erotic feeling. Elizabeth Willey has characterized these books as "Tolkien with sex," but they might equally well be described as "Howard with politesse." They are In The Tradition.

Nor are they alone. More islands lift their heads from the sea, one after the other, misty with distance but rich with strange pleasures: Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy; Lord Dunsany's more-than-lapidarian tales of the Gods of Pegana and the lands Beyond the Fields We Know; Clark Ashton Smith's misanthropic explorations of Zothique, Hyperborea, and Poseidonis; James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* and select other books; and Hope Mirlees's singular and incomparable *Lud-in-the-Mist,* which Neil Gaiman has noted deals with the central issue of the genre, "the reconciliation of the fantastic and the mundane."

This is a motley and argumentative crew to put into one boat. Tolkien disdained Dunsany, Cabell despised the critics, and Smith loathed the human race at large. Hard fantasy creates its own ancestors and antecedents, and it's doubtful that it would alter one word of any of the above works had the others never existed at all. But they belong with each other for the simple reason that they belong nowhere else.

Again the lookout shouts! We have come upon our first contemporary example of hard fantasy.

It is John Crowley's *Little, Big*.

Like most of the works I am anxious to discuss here, *Little, Big* is difficult to summarize. For an instant our task seems horribly daunting: We stand like children at the edge of the dark Wood and we know there are wolves within, witches mad for our flesh, and stranger things besides that are resistant to being put into words. Somewhere in the night an ogre chuckles.

Like children, we cannot resist going just a little deeper in.

Little, Big is a sort of family chronicle, a swirl of relationships radiating backward and forward in time, but always returning to Smoky Barnable and his son Auberon. Smoky, a quiet cipher of a man, falls in love with Daily Alice of the extensive Drinkwater clan, who cures him of anonymity and gives him a place in what her family calls the Tale. He comes to Edgewood, the Drinkwater folly, to marry her, and in an old volume titled *Upstate Houses and Their Histories*, makes a disquieting discovery:

> And here was a photograph of two people sitting at a stone table, having tea. There was a man who looked like the poet Yeats, in a pale summer suit and spotted tie, his hair full and white, his eyes obscured by the sunlight glinting from his spectacles; and a younger woman in a wide white hat, her dark features shaded by the hat and blurred perhaps by a sudden movement. Behind them was part of this house Smoky sat in, and beside them, reaching up a tiny hand to the woman, who perhaps saw it and moved to take it and then again perhaps not (it was hard to tell), was a figure, personage, a little creature about a foot high in conical hat and pointed shoes. His broad inhuman features seemed blurred too by sudden movement, and he appeared to bear a pair of gauzy insect wings. The caption read "John Drinkwater and Mrs. Drinkwater (Violet Bramble); elf. Edgewood, 1912."

Disquieting, but not exactly proof of anything. The reader is left in a position similar to Smoky's, knowing that there is some family connection to the Little People (early on, Daily Alice goes to a pool to ask advice of Grandfather Trout, who unequivocally speaks to her), but never—until the end—clear as to the nature of that connection.

Though he brushes up against it from time to time, Smoky is forever an outsider to the strangeness. He can never truly be a member of the family, for he simply cannot bring himself to believe in fairies. This alienation he inadvertently passes on to his son.

Little, Big opens with Smoky's pilgrimage into the Tale. Auberon makes his first appearance as an adult, when he goes to the City in a vain attempt to escape it. But for all the coziness of their early manifestations, there are large and dangerous forces astir. A vitality is being leached from the decaying world. The City settles into an endless recession. Eternal winter looms. Almost incidentally, Auberon undergoes a corresponding deterioration. Whatever is going on, Auberon is firmly ensnared in its workings.

It is an extreme set of daring that Crowley has performed here. He has crafted a work of contemporary adult literature from the Matter of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. (His debt is acknowledged with nods to Milne, Lofting, Burgess, Carroll, MacDonald, Lewis, and other authors from that great continent of children's fantasy that lies east of the sun, west of the moon, and beyond this essay's purview entirely.*) That he pulls it off at all is nothing short of miraculous. But the greatest single accomplishment of *Little, Big* is how it manages to be consistently fey and homely both, without ever once falling over that razor-edged precipice into the abyss of the twee.

Crowley's book is backward-turning, nostalgic, and tinted in the hues of a nineteenth-century chromo. But I would not have you believe that hard fantasy never boogies to the intellectual beat of the day.

With the ascendance of the information economy over manufacturing and the ensuing rise of semiotics (for each new ruling elite requires theoretical validation), has come a corresponding need to rewrite intellectual history. Medieval Scholasticism, neglected for centuries, has made a resurgence; Giordano Bruno—conveniently martyred by the Church for sins of intellectual hubris—has been grandfathered in as an ancestral figure; and the protoscience of alchemy is looked at afresh not as the progenitor of chemistry or as a spiritual endeavor, but as an occult mental discipline whose chief purpose is the ordering and describing of the universe.

Thus, Mary Gentle's *Rats and Gargoyles.*

In the alchemical world of *Rats and Gargoyles,* triangles have four sides and squares have five. Hu-

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*As does the somewhat smaller continent of young adult fantasy, any discussion of which must surely include Michael de Larrabeiti's "Borrible" books, Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, and the collected works of Diana Wynne Jones, as well as border-adult fantasies such as Patricia A. McKillip's *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld,* to say nothing of . . . Oh God, no. No, no, no, no, no. This is too much. This is madness. Somebody else will have to write that neverending essay. Not me.

mans are an underclass, forbidden to carry weapons or money, ruled by an aristocracy of Rats. Who in turn are subject to the whims of winged monstrosities in the service of twenty-four Decans, the creators and maintainers of the universe, incarnate in an immense cathedral. "We have strange masters" is a byword in the city known only as the Heart of the World.

Indeed. Nor does the strangeness stop there. This is a world in which rulers send their heirs to study at the University of Crime. Where a mysterious black Boat carries the dead back to life. Where the Katayan people have long, prehensile tails. Where flash cameras and mechanical computers coexist with swordplay. We're definitely not in Kansas anymore.

The organizing principle for all this is alchemy, and the narrative strategy is confusion. The alchemy, I suspect, is more a source of imagery than a rigidly enforced system. The confusion is deliberate, a result of the decision to show everything and explain nothing, so that the reader is inevitably a step or two behind the characters at all times. But not entirely in the dark—comprehension is arrived at in retrospect, after the fact. The reader is put in the position of that bird which, flying backward, knows not where it's going but only where it's been.

The *events* of the novel concern a snarl of conspiracies, plots, and blind attempts to stave off disaster. There are at least six factions in play, each with its own agenda. Trying to ride the gathering storm are the White Crow (a Soldier-Adept of the Invisible College), the master architect and comic slob Casaubon, a distinctly Delany-esque young woman whose eidetic gift makes her a King's Memory, and a student prince in commoner's guise, among others. There are dozens of distinct and individually motivated characters, all working at cross purposes.

All the old, familiar pleasures of the genre are here in the double-handfuls: High-rhetoricked, sword-carrying lords, a warrior in crimson armor, romantic sexual liaisons, and dark gods in Leiberesque profusion. But the lords are Rats, the warrior and her seducer both women, the gods ultimately not terribly sinister. There is a constant confounding of expectations in big and little ways throughout. As when disgruntled laborers plan their resistance:

> This ziggurat will rise between two pyramidical obelisks that are equal in thickness to the building itself. A mile away an identical pair of obelisks arises, completed two generations ago. Great hieroglyphs are burned into their stone sides. This burning of stone happened during an eclipse of the sun that lasted four days.
>
> "No. We don't wait." This speaker is the most assured. "You're right: they need us to

> build, because they can't. So—"
>
> "If we stop work, they'll kill enough of us that the rest will go back to work. We've tried that before."
>
> To north and east and aust of the ziggurat, more of the Fane's perpendicular frontages cut the sky. Here, the sky itself is the color of ashes.
>
> "They can force us to work," the first speaker says, "but who can force a man to eat or to sleep?"

Which is not how job actions work in *our* world.

In the end alchemy makes a wonderfully convenient system for what Gentle is doing here: questioning the nature of genre fantasy and challenging the assumptions underlying its appeal while taking full advantage of their power.

William Gibson once remarked that William S. Burroughs, of *Naked Lunch* and *Nova Express* fame, was the first writer to treat science fiction like a rusty egg-beater, something he could pick up and use as a found object in his own art. Gentle here is engaged in a quieter version of the same game, retooled for fantasy. The trademark characteristics of postmodern fiction, it has been much remarked, are pastiche and appropriation. And *Rats and Gargoyles* is—never doubt it—a distinctly postmodern work. Whether anybody deigns to follow or not, it is one of several works that point out a totally new direction for the genre to take.

Running close by the coast of Science Fiction under cover of darkness, we douse the running lights and break out rifles for the crew. We are in disputed waters here, and despite the fact that it won a World Fantasy Award, not everyone would agree that Geoff Ryman's *The Unconquered Country* lies within our territory.

The single most vivid and horrific moment in Ryman's novella (for it is a brief work, though packaged as a stand-alone volume) comes right at the beginning. It's a description of what Third Child, the protagonist, must do to survive. Here's the gist of it:

> Third rented her womb for industrial use. She was cheaper than the glass tanks. She grew parts of living machinery inside her—differentials for trucks, small household appliances . . . . When Third was lucky, she got a contract for weapons. The pay was good because it was dangerous. The weapons would come gushing suddenly out of her with much loss of blood, usually in the middle of the night: an avalanche of glossy, freckled, dark brown guppies with black, soft eyes and bright rodent smiles full of teeth. No matter how ill or exhausted Third felt, she would shovel them, immediately, into buckets and tie down the lids. If she didn't do

> that, immediately, if she fell asleep, the guppies would eat her.

Nothing that follows rises to such appalling heights (thank goodness), but the tone has been set. *The Unconquered Country* is a fantasy treatment of the recent genocidal history of Cambodia and of what Ryman has termed "the blasting of culture, the homogenization of the world," merged into one grim fable. These are not easy things to read about, and I wonder whether I would have finished the book had it been nonfiction or even "straight" fiction? Some nightmare truths come perilously close to being not only unbearable but untellable.

A land known to Third only as the Neighbors has done the unthinkable and, aided by the Big Country, conquered her homeland, the Unconquered Country. The war as perceived by a back country peasant is sketched out in quick strokes: The houses of a village attacked by flying Sharks panic and stampede. A dead suitor returns in the form of a crow to protect and comfort Third. Delicate life-saving devices, evicted from a hospital, plead with soldiers not to be destroyed.

The ultimate enemy of the People, however, is not the Neighbors or even their (American) sponsors, but something less tangible and harder to fight: the cultural Holocaust of the twentieth century. When the rebels finally win back their country, they are no longer People. The Unconquered Country is an imaginary land with invented customs and a make-believe culture. No reader, however, will mistake its climactic scenes for anything but the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge. The rebels in victory have become yet another set of aliens.

This work is no mere allegory, however, or facile conceptualization. It is a genuinely moving human-scale story. Ryman's central achievement is that the events are all seen through the eyes of a traditional peasant woman, and that this is done without condescension or false sentiment. He writes of Third as you or I would of a member of our own family, with respect and the occasional touch of exasperation.

I implied earlier that *The Unconquered Country* might easily be read as science fiction. Everything in it could be justified by speculative science—bioengineering, nanotechnology, and the rest of the conceptual tool kit. I've seen less plausible in works proudly labeled "hard SF." But the mere presence of machinery (though viewed with keen suspicion in the provinces) does not invalidate a work as fantasy. And the truth here is that this is not a work concerned with the uses to which human beings put technology. Rather it's an examination of what happens to a culture that has been passed through Hell.

In the end, after the horror, *The*

Unconquered Country is not about war, atrocity, genocide, or the destruction of cultures. It is about what comes after: What remains untouched, what is of value, and what endures.

Terry Bisson's *Talking Man* must be the only fantasy in existence which contains a careful description of the workings of a hand-clutch John Deere "A" tractor. It's a good description, too. Bisson has worked as an auto mechanic. He knows machines.

Here's how it starts:

> There are two ways to tell a wizard. One is by the blue light that plays around his tires when he is heading north on wet pavement under the northern lights, his headlights pointed toward the top of the world that so many talk about but so few have actually seen.
>
> The other is by his singing.
>
> Talking Man was a wizard who had a small junkyard on the side of a hill on the Kentucky Tennessee line. He sold parts and cars, swapped guns and cars, fixed farm machinery and cars, dug ginseng and mayapple in season, and had a 1,100-pound allotment of burley tobacco which he let his daughter raise. He kept no chickens, no hogs and no dogs.

The ironically named (he never speaks) Talking Man is a wizard from the end of time. He continually dreams the world into being. He is the sole guardian of existence from the all-negating blight of "the unbeen." He lives in a trailer with his sixteen-year-old daughter Crystal.

Mostly, though, he's a hell of a mechanic. "He could take the knock out of a poured-bearing Chevrolet with a set of 3/8-inch sockets and a wood file in an afternoon; he could free a stuck valve by pouring pond water through a carburetor, set points with cigarette papers, and sharpen a chainsaw without a file by passing the bar through a green-persimmon fire and singing a certain unhearable, to most people, song." (I had a mechanic like that once, and I live to find his equal.)

The unbeen was dreamed up by Talking Man's sister and creation and lover (it's nothing if not lonely at the end of time) Dgene. One day she arrives to unsettle his life and undo all of creation. He steals a car and flees.

The car is stolen from one William Tilden Henricks Williams, a dreamer and dropout who is first seen squandering the limited inheritance that was optimistically supposed to get him through law school on an arcade game called Missile Command. Williams and Crystal hit the road, looking for her father, looking for Williams's cousin's car (it's borrowed), looking for answers. Mostly they hit the road because they're at that age when it seems the reasonable thing to do.

Thus begins a car chase to the North Pole and Edminidine, the city at the top of the world. Along the way Bisson explains how to grow tobacco, the true character of Owensboro, and how to heal a punctured oil pan with blood sacrifice.

The chase is beside the point, really. The very best parts of *Talking Man* are all about cars, country life, and those parts of the continent where most writers never go. Particularly Bisson knows Kentucky and points west, landscapes, saints and yahoos included, and can write about them without hysteria or sentimentality. Even in those transformed passages where Illinois has mountains and the Mississippi lies at the bottom of a canyon six miles wide and a thousand feet deep, the text is radiant with his familiarity with and love for non-urban, non-Coastal America.

In one important way, this novel is precursor to the author's acclaimed "Bears Discover Fire." Here for the first time, Bisson found his voice, a gentle Kentucky diction that is at times as smooth and potent as the finest sipping bourbon.

The mythological underpinning—with its brother-and-sister wizards, a city at one end of time and a tower at the other, and so on—is unquestionably high fantasy. Instead of working with the received set of crofts, castles, and cryptic ruins, however, Bisson has created a world out of Exxon stations, Chryslers, and 7-Elevens. As a result *Talking Man* completely transcends its sources.

It's an amazing demonstration of what power there is to be found by rethinking the basics.

But the mere presence of machinery (though viewed with keen suspicion in the provinces) does not invalidate a work as fantasy.

Bisson lives in New York City and his novel is an exemplar of the expatriate's love for lands left behind. Rebecca Ore is a native and current inhabitant of Critz (it rhymes with "heights"), Virginia, who once left for Bohemia and the Big Apple but later returned home to stay. Her love for the South in general and the Blue Ridge foothills region in particular is equally genuine but distinctly qualified. As is amply demonstrated by *Slow Funeral,* her fifth novel and first fantasy.

Maude Fuller is a witch, hiding from her inherited powers in Berkeley, California, faking psychosis to obtain welfare, and living in a commune of witch wannabes for camouflage. Her grandmother, Partridge, is dying, however, and just as she gets involved with an interesting man—an engineer—Maude is called back to Bracken County to watch over Partridge's death. Not coincidentally, she must also face up to the temptation to seize the magic that is her birthright.

The magic is embedded in the county's bedrock micro-plate, the Bracken County allochthon, an anomalous visitor to North America from 600 million years ago, rich in the iron-alumina-silicate crystals that Virginians call "fairy-stones." It manifests itself as capricious discorporate entities that only select individuals can use and be used by. And it is weakened by logic and rational thought:

> Mid October was the season of the last overflights with National Guardsmen and the sheriff's deputies looking for drug patches. Most older Bracken County people hated having the helicopters overhead because that much unadapted machinery in the air spread logic all over the place and killed magic. Even people who didn't rely on entities allied themselves to people who did, made secondary use of the magic. But the children looked around when the machines flew. Freed of a compulsion to stay in the county and fetch and carry for someone powerful, some local kids from the powerless classes joined the military under the protection of its vast machines, the helicopters, the jets from Norfolk that flew practice bombing runs against the high school, afterburner booms canceling a teacher's drone forever. And left, got educated, and never came back.

Most of us think it would be pretty darned Neat if magic really existed. Maude knows better. Magic is inherently cruel. A world in which some people can make deals with the universe and others can't inevitably leads to a social order in which the elite believe that owning people is an absolute right.

You'll be wondering by now how open magic-working (including compulsions, mutilations, and an entire research institute housed in the back of a pickup truck) is supposed to be kept secret. It isn't. One of the best-reasoned elements of *Slow Funeral* is that everybody in the county knows the score, and nobody pretends otherwise. But it's understood that spilling the beans will do no good whatsoever. After all, what cosmopolitan in his right mind is going to listen to a bunch of hick Southerners?

Maude's engineer, Doug, follows her to Bracken County. But the logic she was counting on bolstering her has completely abandoned him. Disgusted by his own labor because it is used to "empower inferior people," he longs for magic, thinking it just another technology he can learn and master. He doesn't realize that magic cannot be learned. That by surrendering his status as a member of the technological elite he's made himself one of the inferiors. That he's just become a victim.

Maude struggles to protect herself, save her feckless engineer, and help Partridge to an easy death by keeping her Aunt Betty from eating the old woman's soul. In the course of which she pieces a quilt, takes Doug to a "chicken fight" (locals don't say "cock" in public), flirts with a homicidal handgun, engages in family politics, and observes the social mores of her part of the world.

It is here that Ore shines, in her observations of the complex interrelationships between blacks and whites, between fundamentalists and nonbelievers, between those who own and those who are owned. She is particularly good with the ruthless politeness that in the South hides bitter truths, and the blind obligations that bind person to person. Especially within families. As any matriarch will tell you, just because a relative is plotting to kill you and eat your soul doesn't get you out of Sunday dinner at her house.

There are expectations to be upheld.

A silent shadow slips over our ship. The crew stare upward with wonder and some little fear. For topping the craggy cliffs of the nearest island is that grim and endlessly rising castle named Gormenghast. Here is one of the great eccentricities of English literature, a more-than-Gothic construct builded upon three books. *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* are both set in that pocket universe, vast and rambling, ruled by tradition and inertia, a treasure-box of repressed and stunted souls. Within are such vividly warped caricatures of humanity as Charles Dickens might have penned in a sour mood. Even their names—Slagg, Barquentine, Flay, Swelter, Sepulchrave—seem little more than flakes chipped from the great stones of Gormenghast.

Yet, paradoxically, when the gloriously villainous Steerpike threatens the social order, the reader is not on his side. And when the monstrously large Gertrude, Countess of Groan, trailed always by a white froth of cats, heavy and abstracted, the very soul of Gormenghast, awakens to the presence of an enemy in the castle, even the dullest spirit must experience a thrill of excitement.

Titus Alone, the third book, is by contrast a lamed thing, for the action takes place outside of Gormenghast, and for all the charming grotesquerie of its characters, it is the castle itself that is the real star of the series. Peake wrote this book while he was dying, and, alas, it shows.

But Peake was not alone in failing to conclude his sequence satisfactorily. E. R. Eddison did not live to complete the third book of his Memison series—the middle chapters of *The Mezentian Gate* exist only in detailed synopses. Avram Davidson failed to finish several multi-volume works. He wrote *The*

Island Under the Earth and stopped. He wrote *Peregrine: Primus* and *Peregrine: Secundus,* two-thirds of the funniest fantasy series ever written, but never arrived at *Terces*. He left *The Phoenix and the Mirror,* with its darkly brilliant vision of Virgil not as the poet history knows but the Magus the Middle Ages thought him, at a cliffhanger, abandoned the project for years, and then went on to write a "non-prequel" to the work. Then he died, a brilliant writer, a tragic figure, and all too typical of what fate awaits even the best fantasists.

There sometimes seems a curse on the entire Archipelago, one that takes the form of broken or flawed trilogies. Tolkien was the grand exception in actually completing *The Lord of the Rings,* and by testimony of the decades he later spent tinkering with and never finishing The *Silmarillion* and related fragments, it was a fluke.

So, despite the fact that it is only the first in a sequence of so far three books that has not yet achieved closure, I have no hesitation in commending to your attention as an important and even core work of hard fantasy, Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood.*

The protagonist of *Mythago Wood* is a young WWII vet named Steven Huxley. But the central character is Ryhope Wood, "Three square miles of original, post-Ice Age forestland. . . . Resistant to change." There is a strange power to the wood that makes it a sort of psychic vortex. Movement inward toward the heartwoods grows progressively more difficult and finally impossible. And by interaction with the minds of whoever is daring enough to enter Ryhope, the wood throws off what Steven Huxley's late father George dubbed "mythagos."

As Steven's brother Christian explains:

> ". . . it's in the unconscious that we carry what he calls the pre-mythago—that's *myth-imago,* the image of an idealized form of a myth creature. The image takes on a substance in a natural environment, solid flesh, blood, clothing, and—as you saw—weaponry. The form of the idealized myth, the hero figure, alters with cultural changes, assuming the identity and technology of the time. When one culture invades another—according to father's theory—the heroes are made manifest, and not just in one location! Historians and legend-seekers argue about where Arthur of the Britons, and Robin Hood *really* lived and fought, and don't realize that they lived in *many* sites. And another important fact to remember is that when the mind image of the mythago forms, it forms in the *whole* population . . . and when it is no longer needed, it remains in our collective uncon-

> scious, and is transmitted through the generations."

The mythagos are a stunning invention, dark and powerful visitors from the Jungian depths. Nearly but not wholly human, they exude a breath of menace and potential violence. Typical of them is the briefly glimpsed Twigling—"a man in brown, leathery clothes, with a wide, gleaming belt around his waist, and a spiky, orange beard that reached to his chest: on his head he wore twigs, held to his crown by a leather band." These are not the special-effects scarecrow myth-figures of mediocre fantasy, but the raw thing, shaggy and dangerous.

Before the book begins, Christian has married and lost a mythago named Guiwenneth, a Roman-era warrior princess archetype and precursor of the later Guenevere. Shot through the eye by a Jack-in-the-green, she died and was buried by her grieving husband alongside the Huxley chicken-huts. But Christian, convinced he can regenerate her, retreats to the woods. Soon he is so deeply embedded in the matrix of power he cannot escape, translated himself more than halfway to the archetypal. His very nature is profoundly changed.

The ley lines of obsession run like fire through *Mythago Wood.* Huxley *pater*'s life had been spent cataloguing the mythagos, identifying the periods that gave rise to them, and through them trying to understand the minds of the peoples of ancient and prehistoric times. The search destroyed his marriage and alienated his sons. Yet he kept notes only sporadically, and never published. The scientific impulse gave way to more primal drives. In the end, he fixated on a single mythago—Guiwenneth. Only to lose her to his son. Who in turn loses her reincarnation to Steven. The relationship between brothers turns murderous.

Of all the books under discussion in this essay, *Mythago Wood* is hands-down the single most gripping. For surface plot alone, it is compulsive reading. But like the wood itself, there are depths here. As the brothers discover, the mythagos are at least partially shaped by unconscious expectations. Christian's Guiwenneth is gentle and unwarlike because his father—who knew her first—could not imagine a violent woman. When Steven first encounters her, she is changed, fiercer, because she has been formed this time by Christian. The father died seeking the Urscumug, the primary archetypal image from which all other forms derive. But when the Urscumug finally appears, its boar's face has painted over it in white clay the features of George Huxley.

There is an intellectual excitement to this work that rivals the more visceral appeals of blood-lust and fratricide. Holdstock takes the fragmentary and contradictory elements of folklore and twists them into a new shape. His characters act out a convincing demonstration of the power and nature of myth and how it shapes and drives the human animal, however sophisticated we believe we are, refuse to acknowledge it how we will. There's no denying that *Mythago Wood* is entertaining, but it is much more as well.

I can think of only two writers who can rival Holdstock in his bred-in-the-bone comprehension of the workings of myth. M. John Harrison in his Viriconium books and Keith Roberts in such works as *Pavane* and *The Chalk Giants* each in his own very different fashion displays a startlingly sure understanding of the stuff and nature of myth and its historic foundations. It can scarce be coincidence that all three of these writers are English. In the British Isles, children grow up with stone circles, Roman roads, and ring forts sometimes literally in their back yards. In my darker moments, I sometimes wonder if Americans should give up on writing fantasy altogether.

If there is one commonality among the hard fantasists, it is that they are not a prolific lot. Tanith Lee, however, is prolific. Which makes it hard to single out one work for examination. A survey of her *oeuvre* would necessitate the exclusion of other writers. Nor can she simply be skipped over. She is a Power, and has earned her place here.

I've chosen Lee's Arkham House collection *Dreams of Dark and Light* not only in the name of ruthless simplification but also because it is a rare thing for a hard fantasist to work much in short fiction (novels being the preferred length of eccentricity, and eccentricity being the name of the game) and rarer still for one individual to excel at both lengths.

Here's a quick sampler of what happens in *Dreams of Dark and Light:* A selkie beds a seal-hunter in trade for the pelt of her murdered son. The dying servant of an aged vampire procures for her a new lover. A writer becomes obsessed with a masked woman who may or may not be a gorgon. A young woman rejects comfort, luxury, and the fulfillment of her childhood dreams, for a demon lover. These are specifically adult fictions.

There is more to these stories than the sexual impulse. But I mention its presence because its treatment is never titillating, smirking, or borderline pornographic, as is so much fiction that purports to be erotic. Rather, it is elegant, langorous, and feverish by turns, and always tinged with danger. Which is to say that it is remarkably like the writing itself.

In "Elle Est Trois (La Mort)" three artists—a poet, a painter, a composer—are visited by avatars of Lady Death. The suicidal allure of *la vie de boheme,* with its confusion of death, sex, poverty and the muse, has rarely been so well conveyed as here. The artists are captured as their essences, each courting death in his own way. The composer France unwittingly acknowledges this when he tells his friend Etiens Saint-Beuve, "One day such sketches will be worth sheafs of francs, boxes full of American dollars. When you are safely dead, Etiens, in a pauper's grave."

After France himself has been taken, the poet Armand Valier muses on Death's avatars (the Butcher, the Thief, the Seducer) in Lee's sorcerous prose:

> . . . And then the third means to destruction, the seductive death who visited poets in her irresistible caressing silence, with the petals of blue flowers or the blue wings of insects pasted on the lids of her eyes, and: See, your flesh also, taken to mine, can never decay. And this will be true, for the flesh of Armand, becoming paper written over by words, will endure as long as men can read.
>
> And so he left the window. He prepared, carefully, the opium that would melt away within him the iron barrier that no longer yielded to thought or solitude or wine. And when the drug began to live within its glass, for an instant he thought he saw a drowned girl floating there, her hair swirling in the smoke. . . . Far away, in another universe, the clock of Notre Dame aux Lumineres struck twice.

This is the apotheosis of decadence—sex, drugs, and death mixed into a single potent cocktail. But, lest the reader suspect her of indulging in mere literary nostalgia, Lee notes in passing that "the poet would have presented this history quite differently," by introducing a unifying device, such as a cursed ring. This sly contrasting of the story's sinuous structure with the clanking apparati of its Gothic ancestors does more than just establish that the fiction is an improvement on antique forms. It hints (no more) that the real horror, the real beauty, the real significance of the story, is that death is universal. She is a true democrat, an unselective lover who sooner or later comes for all, aware of her or not, the reader no less than the author.

Once upon a time the Romantics elevated the emotions above reason, sought the sublime in the supernatural and the medieval, and made a cult of the equation of sex and death. Following generations took their machinery and put it to lesser ends, much as the forms of magic were taken over by performers of sleight-of-hand. They could do no better, for they had lost the original vision.

Lee's work is a return to sources and a rejuvenation of that original vision. It is the higher passions that matter. Viktor, the bored aristocrat in "Dark as Ink" is too wise to pursue his obsessions, and for this sin suffers a meaningless life and early death. But the eponymous heroine of "La Reine Blanche" finds redemption despite her singular regicide and unwitting betrayal of her fated love because she has stayed true to her passions. An erotic spirituality shimmers like foxfire from the living surfaces of this book.

By some standards (though not mine) these are works not of fantasy but of horror. There has long been a midnight traffic between the genres, ridge-runners and embargo-breakers smuggling influences across the borders. But ought we care? No one would dare attempt to expel the late Fritz Leiber from the Empire of the Fantastic. Yet he readily admitted that nearly all his work, at heart, was horror. Even the Fafhrd and Mouser stories, though disguised by ambiguously upbeat endings and the wit and charisma of their heroes, exist in an almost Lovecraftian horror-fiction universe. In the end, the only question that matters is whether the work suits our purposes or not.

"As I supposed," says a raven in one of these tales, "your story is sad, sinister, and interesting." Exactly so. There are twenty-three stories in this volume, and I recommend them all.

The obsidian sea turns bottle-green and then turquoise. Sand grates under the keel. We are come upon *Bones of the Moon.* Beaching our ship, we lightly set foot on . . . land?

It is a strange fate that has befallen Jonathan Carroll. A man whose first novel, *The Land of Laughs,* was enthusiastically embraced by the genre readership, has with equal ease been acclaimed by the mainstream as one of its own. The wet smooch of genre is normally the kiss of death as far as literary respectability goes. Yet there he stands.

The wet smooch of genre is normally the kiss of death as far as literary respectability goes.

Well, the mainstream is a funny place. It claims for its own Amos Tutuola's "thronged and grisley" (as Dylan Thomas characterized it) *The Palm-Wine Drinkard,* along with the collected works of T. H. White and C. S. Lewis, Michael Ayrton's *The Maze-Maker,* and even such genre superstars as Ray Bradbury and Ursula K. Le Guin, while stoutly excluding R. A. Lafferty, John Myers Myers' *Silverlock,* and (as yet) Samuel R. Delany. It embraced, lionized, and then abandoned James Branch Cabell, whose antic satire *Jurgen* is still alive with fantastic invention long after the salacious qualities that prompted a famous obscenity trial have become invisible to the modern eye. It treasures Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* while decrying those fantastic elements without which it has neither existence nor purpose. There is no use looking to the mainstream for intellectual rigor.

To discover exactly why the outside world would even consider poaching in the genre preserves, one need look no further than to Carroll's wholly enviable prose style:

> Because Greece was the first "Europe" I had ever known, I loved it like you love your first child: you demand everything of it and what you receive swells your heart like a balloon.
>
> When we returned to Italy after those first two weeks, I had the secret fear that nothing could be as good as those first days overseas. Afternoon light couldn't possibly fall on broken walls the same way as it did in Greece. Where else on earth would someone think of using giant rubber bands to hold the tablecloth down at an outdoor restaurant? On beaches of black sand, men walked alongside ancient mules that carried melons for sale. The men cut the melons in half with one swat of a big knife and the red fruit tasted so sweet and cool in the hot afternoon sun.

Nor is it only in the depiction of sensuous detail that Carroll excels. The fantasy world of Rondua, experienced by his heroine, Cullen James, in a series of connected dreams, is as crisp and vivid as so many illustrations torn from so many classic picture-books. Even his throwaways are evocative, as when Cullen reflects on stories told within her dreams, that "Like jokes we hear and then forget until someone begins telling them again, I could have told my son what came next: how the mountains had learned to run, why only rabbits were allowed pencils, when the birds had decided to become all one color."

Dreaming, Cullen accompanies her young son Pepsi—who in the "real" world was aborted—the wolf Felina, Martio the Camel, and Mr. Tracy, a dog in a big felt hat, on a quest for the five Bones of the Moon. In her waking life, she suffers, loves, weds, suffers more, finds new friends, and faces a final horror at the point where dreams and reality collide.

The ending, as in all of Carroll's fiction, is abrupt and alarming, like an unsuspected trap-door opening underfoot. The first several times I encountered this, it seemed an inexplicable loss of control for an otherwise accomplished writer. Eventually it became clear that for whatever unguessable reasons this was a deliberate effect. It is simply part of the price you have to pay, if you want to read the book.

Yet I'll confess to having my doubts whether this island should be on our itinerary at all. The fantasy world of Rondua, brilliant as it is in glimpses and pieces, is a patchwork creation. Were the real-world sections excised and the rest expanded to fill the gaps, it could never be made into a self-consistent system. Nor, as the reader is reminded by a dozen clever devices, is it meant to.

When an author doesn't deep down, on some level, believe in the reality of his invented world, he is not engaged in fantasy but metaphor. *Bones of the Moon* is like unto the sea-monster Jasconius on which Saint Brendan and his mariner monks celebrated a Mass to the glory of God every Easter Sunday for seven years. It is no true island at all but a fabulous beast, and one that owes its allegiance not to our own dear lords but to the masters of cislunar literature.

The less daring members of the crew shift uneasily, ready to bolt for the ship at the least sign that vast Jasconius is preparing to plunge down into those airless and Stygian realms and dominions where such as they cannot thrive. The ground trembles underfoot.

James Blaylock first got the field's attention with *The Digging Leviathan,* which profoundly puzzled science fiction readers by narrating a frenzied round of slapstick activity by a crew of suburban misfits, all centered on the eponymous digging machine, without ever quite getting around to having his characters switch the damned thing *on*. He's written several very good books since, but I've fixed on *Land of Dreams* because it indirectly explains exactly why this was beside the point.

Land of Dreams focuses on Skeezix, Helen, and Jack, three young-teen orphans in a coastal Northern California village. In stark contrast to most genre fiction, it is not immediately clear in which direction the book intends to go. For a time odd events simply accumulate: A midnight train thunders down rusty and incomplete tracks incapable of supporting it. Unwholesome fish are taken from the sea. A man the size of a human thumb is briefly glimpsed, holding a mouse-head mask in his arms. The carnival comes to town. An enormous shoe washes ashore and the three friends resolve to salvage it and take it to their friend, Dr. Jensen:

> Jack set a hooded lantern on a driftwood burl, so that the light was shining down on the shoe, and then all three of them started bailing water out of it with milk buckets . . . They shoved one of the timbers—an immense broken oar, it seemed, from a monumental wrecked rowboat—in under the toe and then wedged the other timber under it, levering away at the first until the heel edged around and down the hill. They inched it along, burying their fulcrum timber in the soft beach sand and pulling it out and resetting it and burying it again, until water

> rushed from the toe to the heel. Then they bailed it clean, shoved it farther, bailed once more, and then pushed the shoe entirely over onto its side, ocean water cascading out past the tongue and the laces and the heel edge along with a school of silvery fish that flopped and wriggled on the wet sand.

Which is as good a description of how to bail out a giant shoe as I've ever encountered. The shoe joins the doctor's collection of big stuff, including "a round, convex sheet of cracked glass, like the crystal of an impossible watch; a brass belt buckle the size of a casement window; and a cuff link that might as easily have been a silver platter." Later, Dr. Jensen caulks the shoe, rigs a mast, fits a tiller across the heel, and takes it out sailing.

It should already be clear that half the novel's population—the good guys—are misfits, cranks, eccentrics, incompetents, or admixtures of all the above. Arrayed against them are an equally motley crew of villains, drawn by Blaylock with great gusto. Miss Flees and her toady Peebles, the choleric MacWilt, the occasionally corviform Dr. Brown, and the rest, are hideous and malignant creatures all, and prey to their own craven, violent, and envious natures.

Luckily, they're even less effective than the heroes. As a kindly ghost explains to Helen, "They're certain *you* hate things too, that the world is made out of dirt. But that's what gives you the edge; they can't understand you." Guided partially by the villains' attempts to stop them, the kids ultimately manage to penetrate the secret of the twelve-yearly Solstice (whatever this phenomenon might be, one observes, it has nothing to do with the sun) and set matters straight.

The significant explanatory moment I promised earlier comes when Helen, Jack, and Skeezix finally put the pieces back together and break through the membrane separating them from a new realm of reality: One where unimaginable trains carry throngs of people backward and forward in time, with stops in all eras. For a brief moment all possibilities are theirs, all times and places open to them. Nothing is forbidden. They are become Illuminati, knowers of great secrets and holders of immense power.

They can't get back to their own world fast enough.

Power and knowledge hold no charm comparable to that of the world they know: A world in which the vibration of unseen machines is a constant whisper underfoot. Where strange events proliferate and disperse. Where revelation is always imminent but never quite arrives.

Skeezix, typically, gets the last word. Reflecting on life, he muses that "it seemed that the precariousness of the business lent a sort of flavor to it; it would be a dreary place all in all if his existence were mapped out too thoroughly."

It is precisely this love of the quotidian, of the homely, of simple pleasures and quirky people and natural oddities, that burns at the heart of Blaylock's art. This is why the digging leviathan was doomed to failure. This is why the subway system of the gods is discovered and abandoned. The world is enough, he suggests. Who could ask for more?

Iain Banks has the pleasant distinction of simultaneously holding down two separate literary careers, one as the mainstream author of such acclaimed works as *The Wasp Factory* and *Canal Dreams*, and the other as an equally admired science fiction writer.

I'll confess that I don't know which hat Banks was wearing when he wrote *The Bridge*. It hardly matters. What matters is the remarkable setting he has chosen for the bulk of the book—an enormous and seemingly endless bridge stretching from horizon to horizon across a nameless ocean. An entire society lives upon the bridge, employing bicycles, rickshaws, and motorcycles for short-term transportation and steam trains for longer voyages. Here is the scene from a platform above the main train deck:

> Over the noise of the milling people, the continual hisses and clanks, grindings and gratings, klaxons and whistles of the trains on the deck beneath sound like shrieks from some mechanistic underworld, while every now and again a deep rumble and a still more profound quaking and rattling announces a heavy train passing somewhere below; great pulsing clouds of white steam roll around the street and upwards.
>
> Above, where the sky ought to be, are the distant, hazily seen girders of the high bridge; obscured by the rising fumes and vapors, dimmed by the light intercepted outside them by their carapace of people-infected rooms and offices, they rise above and look down upon the rude profanity of these afterthought constructions with all the majesty and splendor of a great cathedral roof.

The first-person narrator is being treated for amnesia. He finds himself in a mannered society rather like that of Freud's Vienna but riddled with small absurdities, not the least of which is the total lack of curiosity its citizens display toward the bridge itself. What lands does it connect? Who built it? How old is it? Only the protagonist cares, and he cannot find out.

His sporadic search for answers is the chief of three alternating narratives. The second follows the life and difficult romance of a (young, at first) man in contemporary Scotland, and the third . . . well, it can only be characterized as the adventures of Conan the Glaswegian.

At first the farcical adventures of a nearly brainless swordsman with an overintellectualized familiar and a hideous accent ("I luv the ded, this old basturt sez to me when I wiz tryin to get some innfurrmashin out ov him. You fuckin old pervert I sez, gettin a bit fed up by this time enyway, and slit his throate; ah askd you whare the fukin Sleepin Byootie woz, no whit kind of humpin you like. No, no he sez, splutterin sumthin awfy and gettin blud all ovir ma new curiearse, no he sez I sed Isle of the Dead" and so on) seem jarring and even intrusive. There are moments in the main narration when the fabric of reality wears thin and opens a window into the second plot-line. But this barbarian stuff is straight out of left field.

These segments are so engaging, however, so funny in an awful way, that the reader comes to accept them while doubting they'll ever quite make sense.

The Bridge is, underneath all, a novel of psychological revelation. So I am forced to be a little coy about the plot. In broad terms, it is about the protagonist's reluctance to deal with the mystery of his situation. He is a man in serious peril and it is his task to discover its nature. However, life on the bridge is pleasant, and he has met an engaging woman, an engineer's daughter named Abberlaine Arrol.

The sections on the bridge are more vivid and engaging than those set in Scotland. The same could be said of the swaggering, cigar-smoking Abberlaine compared to her real-world counterpart. Small wonder that the protagonist is uneager to rock the boat. But little things start going wrong. Telephones cease to work for him. He loses his social position. Mad events proliferate. He must finally find the resolve to ask tough questions and face their consequences.

Morals are out of fashion these days, even in the retrogressive universes of fantasy. But if there is one message to be taken away from the book, it is this: That sometimes the reason life seems difficult is that we are engaged in difficult and important work

And our foul-mouthed, sexually deplorable, and bloody-handed barbarian? One of the many delights of *The Bridge* is the marvelously orchestrated revelation by story's end that he is integral to the plot. Central, even.

Do I violate my own definition if I cite Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint* as a hard fantasy? It's a tough call. The critic and editor Donald G. Keller denies that he took its subtitle, "A Melodrama of Manners" and used it to define a previously undiscerned school of fantasy which he called "fantasy of manners" and others puckishly dubbed "mannerpunk" before settling on the more decorous "mannerism."

But there is no getting around the fact that *Swordspoint* has become the figurehead work for that nascent subgenre.

We are in dark waters here, murky with wrack and seaweed. Those clear, pellucid depths through which could be seen, fathoms deep, Grecian triremes with coral-encrusted amphorae holding ancient wine still drinkable, are no more. And whose fault should this be but science fiction's?

With the rise of science fiction as a genre, the currents of influence became tangled and recomplicated.* John Brunner's *The Traveler in Black* was strongly influenced by Lord Dunsany's exquisitely crafted tales of the kingdoms at the Edge of the World; Michael Moorcock's marvelous *Gloriana* was in part a conscious homage to the Gormenghast books, in token of which it is dedicated to Mervyn Peake; and Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* (a work in which on examination all the fantastic elements have hard science rationales—but what of that?) is a direct descendant of Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* which in its turn was clearly derived from Clark Ashton Smith's chronicles of the final civilizations of humanity. To name but a few examples.

The temptation to claim that the authors of these works have transformed their influences so thoroughly as to render these books fit for our colonizing banner is strong. But, as a famous out-of-genre fantasist once put it, it would be wrong.

Still . . . water does not run uphill, nor do we inherit our looks from our grandchildren. The recognition by Wolfe, Vance, Moorcock, Brunner, that there was much to admire about their predecessors does not invalidate those works they loved so dearly. *On the day it was published,* Kushner's *Swordspoint* was undeniably a hard fantasy.

But—this is a question the author herself has raised in conversation—is *Swordspoint* a fantasy at all? Well . . . if I can say this without challenging every rogue swordsman, masterless samurai and cheap gunsel with a gaudy line of patter to an exchange of definitions, it seems strange that so little has been made of the deep connection between fantasy and fantasies. By "fantasies" I mean of course those pleasant meditations on the world not as it is but as we wish it were and know it cannot be. *Swordspoint* is a demonstration that it is not the furniture—the dragons, ogres, elves, and wizards, the magical swords, cups, and corkscrews—that make a work fantasy but that hopeless yearning vision of life as it cannot be that burns green and eternal at its heart.

But here. On the first page, Kushner sets the scene:

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*For a good example of exactly *how* tangled, consider only Avram Davidson's *The Phoenix and the Mirror* which employs the tools of hard science fiction to describe the creation of a virgin speculum (a mirror that has never known a reflection) couched strictly in the technology of the Roman Empire as it was later misunderstood by Dark Ages scholars.

* * *

> Let the fairy-tale begin on a winter's morning, then, with one drop of blood new-fallen on the ivory snow: a drop as bright as a clear-cut ruby, red as the single spot of claret on the lace cuff. And it therefore follows that evil lurks behind each broken window, scheming malice and enchantment; while behind the latched shutters the good are sleeping their just sleeps at this early hour in Riverside. Soon they will arise to go about their business; and one, maybe, will be as lovely as the day, armed, as are the good, for a predestined triumph. . . .

This is an elegant stick of prose, but what is more important is what follows upon it. For it is immediately undercut by the next paragraph, which enumerates the lies, evasions, and deliberate misleadings its predecessor employs. Leaving only the grace of the writing and an admirable warning of the unexpected turns of wit that will inform the narration of events.

This high wit is integral to the purpose of the novel. For the fantasy that drives this book and its characters is the vision of a life without regrets or consequences, in which all that matters is making a figure of oneself and winning the admiration of a scorned universe. This is an equipoise that cannot be maintained, although the swordsman Richard St Vier tries hard, as do in their own ways the villainous Ferris, the duchess Tremontaine, and the callow Lord Michael. Even the human engine for the novel's events—Alec, failed student, St Vier's lover, and proverbial Boyfriend from Hell—who knows from hard experience that it cannot be done, tries to hold the world in despite. Secretly, all know they are doomed.

In the face of this knowledge, only wit can keep them going. Posture is forever threatened by reality, for as Lord Ferris aphorises, *Every man lives at swordspoint.* "I mean," he explains, "the things he cares for. Get them in your grasp, and you have the man—or woman—in your power. Threaten what they love, and they are absolutely at your mercy: you have a very sharp blade pressed to their throat."

Can, then, a dissolute failed student find happiness with a swordsman whose self-image requires that he die young? Well . . . it *is*, after all, a fairy tale of sorts. But in a novel that begins with St Vier vaulting a wall and running through lightless streets to escape not retribution for the murder he has just committed but the cloying compliments of the bystanders on his style, nothing is to be taken for granted.

There is a type of young woman we have all either known or been: who worships at the altar of the Romantic; plays old border ballads on pennywhistle, recorder, or hammer dulcimer; tacks a hand-lettered sign reading MAGIC IS AFOOT on her dormitory room door; reads the Tarot for friends and *The White Goddess* for pleasure; and treasures a hundred obscure books by measure of how close they come to an ideal world in which gypsies and scarecrows, old marbles and long skirts, elves, quilts, candles, hot chocolate with cinnamon, feathered caps, rainy days, and snug houses with big fireplaces are part of a single, inexpressibly significant enterprise. There have been attempts to set a novel in this young woman's world view, but those I have seen all (but I have not seen all) fall short of the mark by the same process that mars most stories about writers' friends. The heroine is gifted with such preternatural grace and good will, wit, insight, fighting skills and fashion sense as to make the reader either resolve to lose some weight and take in a few night classes at the university or else hurl the book across the room in disgust. Usually the latter.

This is not a mistake that Greer Ilene Gilman makes in *Moonwise.* Her heroine slouches through the novel submerged and half-lost in language, desperately in love with her invented worlds, faintly ridiculous, totally convincing, and altogether charming. Ariane is the type-specimen for her kind, and it is her absolute unquestioning belief in the immanence of the fantastic that allows the reader to accept it when those fantasies overswell their banks one evening and sweep away her best friend Sylvie in a torrent of words.

Here's a sample of *Moonwise*'s prose in a quieter moment:

> She remembered a game of croquet, played by mothlight on their cant of crooked lawn, amid the gangling bygone lilacs, and the rose-thorns and the currants, in the Lyonesse of dusk. Their set was old, the heavy balls and mallets battered colorless, and the iron wickets grim as Newgate gallows. It was a fierce and freakish game; the air was flawed with wild giggles, pibrochs of ecstatic fury, threats and jeers and ranting taunting triumphs. Ariane was battle-drunk, amazed by her own rapacity. The others played elusively, erratically as moths: now belantered in the bushes; now undone by the backlash of a clacking, cleverstick riposte; now flying with uncanny grace through hoops that should have been unassailable as rainbows. Ariane stonewalled. Her floating, fluttering muslin skirt was caught and rent, entangled in the thorns of roses, where she skulked with cunning strategy; the others unpicked her from the brambles.

Now, either you think there is something magnificent about a croquet game rendered thus, or you do not, and if you do not I fail to see how you will get past even the first chapter. Much less the genuinely difficult passage in which Sylvie disappears. This is a book in which dreams, memories, desires, and reality are not distinct, but merely regions on one continuum among whose convolutions one can lose oneself in an absent-minded moment. The shift in levels can occur within a single sentence, and honesty compels me to admit that there were times late at night when I felt I had been invited to fling off my shoes and dance through the brambles.

But a difficult style, it has been observed, is its own defense. It scares away the faint of heart. Once the reviewers and critics were done with them, there is nobody who ever finished Frederick Rolfe's *Hadrian the Seventh* or Alexander Theroux's *Three Wogs* or Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* with anything less than delight. *Moonwise* is a willfully special book whose partisans will be treasuring its virtues well into the long night of the coming century.

. . . honesty compels me to admit that there were times late at night when I felt I had been invited to fling off my shoes and dance through the brambles.

In its influence, *Moonwise* was certainly the most important fantasy work of the past decade for the simple reason that it roused an entire generation of new and unknown fantasy writers to Ambition. For a year after it came out, the conventions and writers' workshops buzzed with a constant mutter of amazement. A total unknown, with her first book, had reinvented not only the substance but also the language of the fantasy novel, all to the satisfaction not of the perceived marketplace but of her own inner demons. It inevitably raised the unspoken but potent question, If she can do it, then why not me? *Why not me?*

And, indeed . . . why not?

The mutinous crew gather on the foredeck, every dwarf and man-jack of them outraged that their favorite works have been passed over. One cries out for Delia Sherman's *The Porcelain Dove*. Another for A. S. Byatt's *Possession*. A third for John M. Ford's *The Dragon in Waiting*, and a fourth for something—anything! —by Tim Powers. Partisans demand Joy Chant, Poul Anderson, Andre Norton, Gregory Frost, Susan Cooper, Leigh Brackett, Fletcher Pratt. Everyone is angry that I have overlooked L. Sprague de Camp.

It is vain to point out that *The Porcelain Dove* is a historical fantasy and that historical fantasy is currently a growth literature, with enough going on in it to support any number of essays the length of this. That Byatt's book is not really a fantasy but, as she subtitled it, "A Romance" and has more in common with the works of the Sisters Brontë than with Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea tetralogy. That originality and good writing are not enough—to be included herein requires Blind Luck as well. That the cataloguing of islands is an arduous and—elder gods willing—endless task.

This satisfies nobody. One burly ruffian demands to know where R. A. Lafferty's work fits into this scheme. It doesn't, really, any more than does Neal Barrett, Jr.'s *The Hereafter Gang*. Some fish are so odd as to escape even our all-embracing net. Howard Waldrop is a good example. Is he still considered an outlaw fantasist? Does outlaw fantasy even exist anymore? Linnaeus notwithstanding, a comprehensive taxonomy of fantasy is more than simply difficult. The mere thought of it is a nightmare.

The crew will not listen. Their passions are aroused. Eyes flash. Knives glint. Mystic runes on blades and hilts glow with murderous intent.

But a muttered word of power stills them all. Voices fade. The ship recedes, becomes nothing more than a figure on the written page, harmless. I take up the typed sheets of this essay, tamp their edges even, and reach for an envelope.

Beyond the limited horizons of these pages, a hundred fantastic islands appear in the distance like waterspouts, like strange similes, like exotic flowers blossoming from so many gun-barrels. It was never my ambition to chart out the Archipelago and pin its isles down on paper like so many dead butterflies. Rather it was to set out a direction for travel.

It curls like a sleeping dragon, does the Archipelago. No man knows the shape and nature of the submarine geologic forces that brought it into being. We can only conjecture what sea-changing currents wash its divergent shores. Our voyage has brought us to the heart of words, of yearning, to that form of literature in which the nature of each is blended with the other and their essence is revealed to be the transformation from the unbearable What Is to the unreachable If Only.

Algis Budrys once remarked that hard science fiction was not a subgenre but a flavor, the flavor of "toughness." If hard fantasy has a flavor, then surely that flavor must be "regret." And if I have one regret, it is that there is for me neither the time nor the space nor yet the wisdom to lay out for you all the many lands and wonders to be found scattered through the Archipelago. I have failed you. Yet if there be but one book mentioned here you have not yet sampled, I leave you better off than you were when first we met.

Here, good milords and fine ladies, I must leave your presence, for we have arrived at that destination we were fated for since time began, that happy condition that was our object from the very onset of our quest: A most excellent beginning.

And so we set sail. ■

We are thrilled to welcome Kate Wilhelm back to our pages. "I Know What You're Thinking" is her first story for *Asimov's* since the 1986 Nebula-Award-winning novella "The Girl Who Fell Into the Sky." Two of Ms. Wilhelm's earlier novellas, "With Thimbles, With Forks and Hope" (November 1981) and "The Gorgon Field" (August 1985), will be part of a collection of stories about her detectives, Charlie and Constance, that is coming out next year. The book is tentatively titled *Torch Song*. Ms. Wilhelm's latest novel, *The Best Defense*, was published by St. Martin's in June.

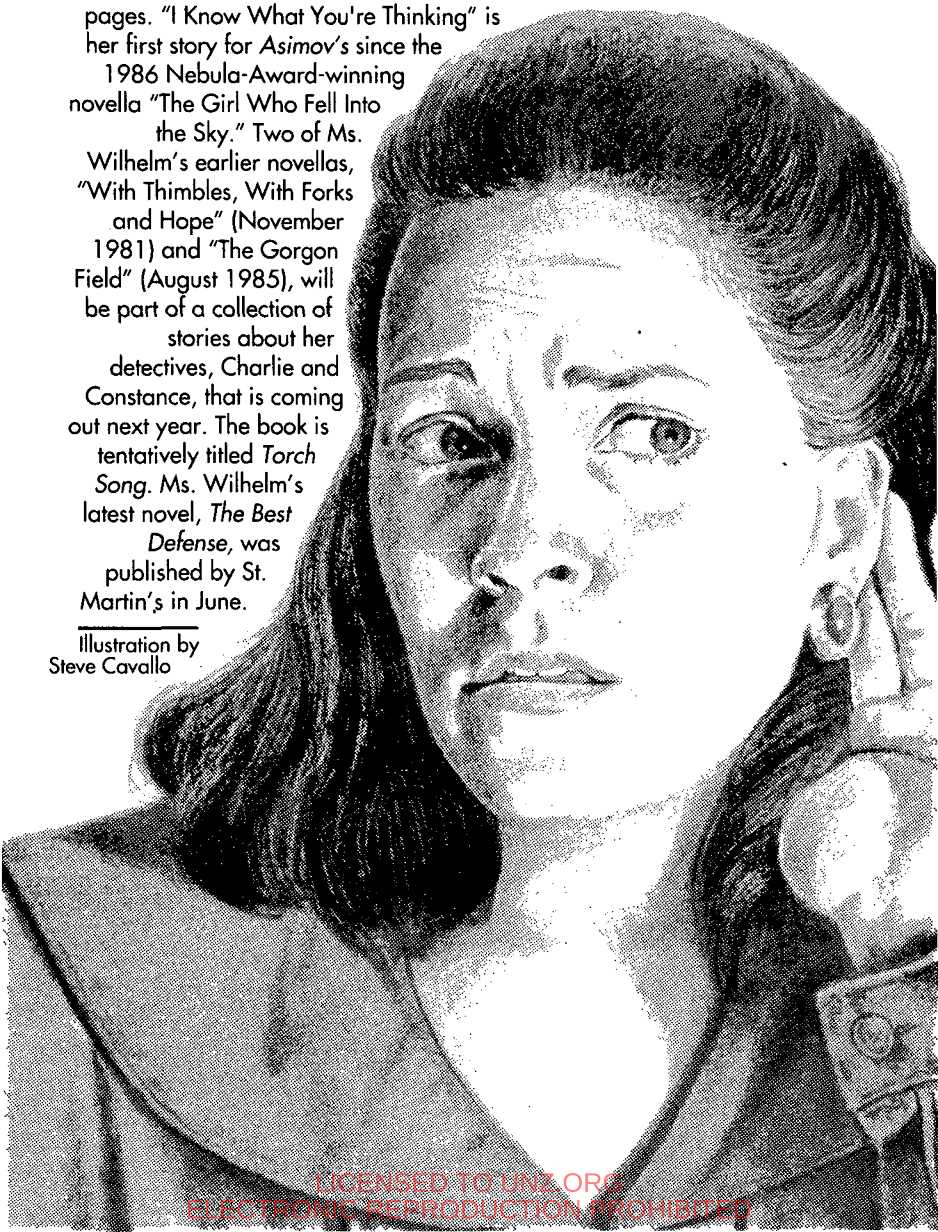
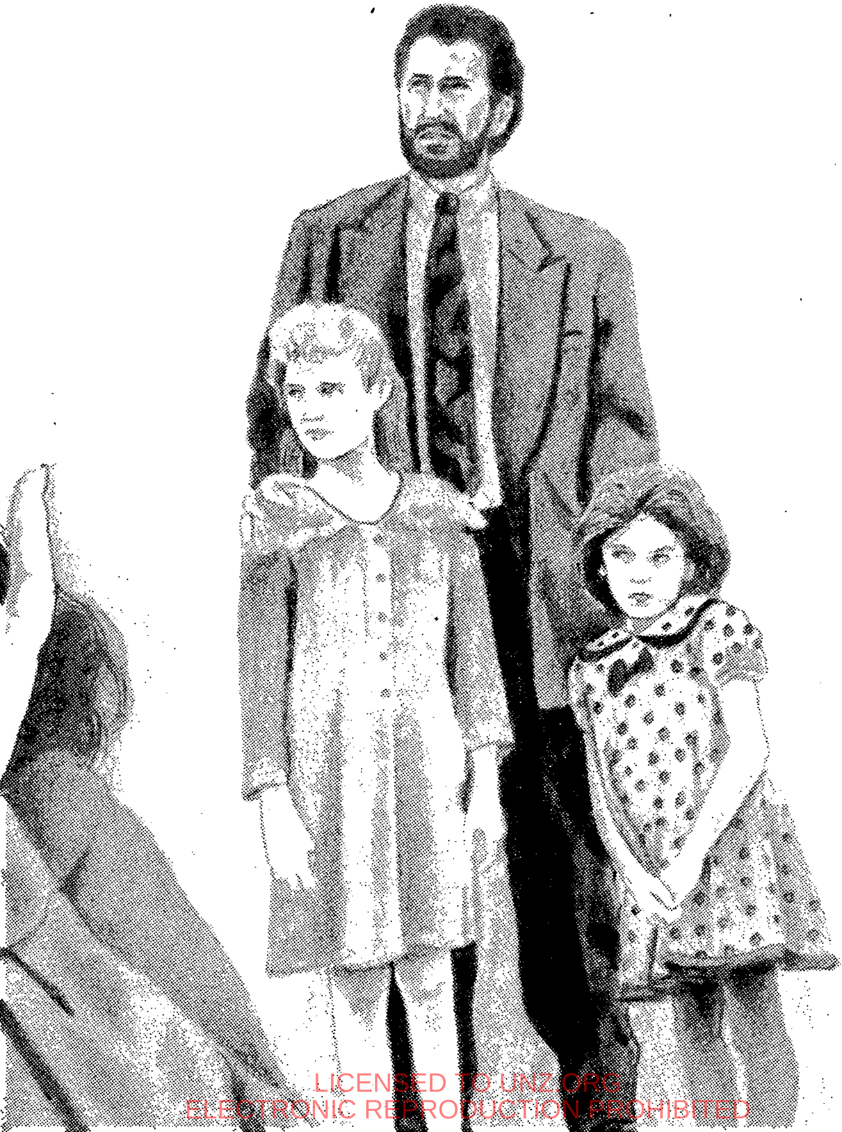


Illustration by
Steve Cavallo

Kate Wilhelm

I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING



Dinner parties were always the worst. In big noisy groups no one paid much attention to me since I was quiet and smiled a lot. But at dinner parties everyone became the focus of attention if only for a moment. The white noise became real noise and I moved in fear verging on panic that I might slip and drown in it.

"Honey, you have to come," Cal said. "His people don't invest in just the company, but the ones behind it, and their families. They look for stability, in the business and in the personal lives of people they're interested in."

It was as bad as I had known it would be. When Mr. Davies shook my hand he said, "And finally I get to meet the charming Mrs. Paterson. How do you do?"

He smiled affably through an appraisal as cold as a mortician's. So this is the kid with the money, pretty, but not all there, touched, he was thinking, doesn't really look it, but who ever can tell. Wondering if Cal played around much, how I was in bed, if I kept a tight rein on the money. Tomorrow he'd be out of here, do something about his lower back, and if Gloria had messed up again, he'd take off her head. ". . . such an impressive young man, your Cal. Very good presentation today, one of the best I've seen." . . . doing numbers about the company finances . . .

I smiled at him and moved away. All evening I smiled a lot, and said as little as possible and I thought I had succeeded beautifully until we were in the car on our way home.

"Why in God's name did you start talking about chemical warfare in the Persian Gulf?" Cal asked in a harsh low voice.

Muscles I had thought already tense drew up even tighter until I felt I couldn't move. I had done it again.

He was driving too fast, so angry he was hoping something would get in front of him, something he could smash. Never again, he was thinking, make excuses, illness . . . come on, slow down, I'll ram you . . .

I was shivering as I realized that no one else was pretending anything; neither was it practice and self control; they didn't hear each other. It wasn't that they had all learned to live in such a noisy world; rather, the world they lived in was silent. I was too frightened and stunned to speak. Cal wanted me to try to explain so he could have an excuse to yell at me. I had detected impatience, irritation, dislike from time to time, and love, passion, lust, amusement, and I had felt those same things about him; everyone went through such violent swings. On the drive home he hated me, he wished I was dead, that he was dead, that we all were dead, especially Davies, the slob . . . I sat with my chin tucked in, my eyes closed, trying to bring back the white noise.

The drive home was short, out of Portland on the interstate, then onto the twisting country road to our house. While he paid the baby-sitter I went upstairs to check on the girls. Donna was eight, Patty seven. Patty's covers were all over, part on her, most on the floor; Donna looked as if she had not moved since going to bed. I straightened out Patty's bedding, kissed them both, and then went downstairs.

"Cal, we have to talk," I said. He was on the couch in the living room with a drink in his hand, thinking of Davies, and his own coming presentation to a board of directors down in Los Angeles, thinking about Harry who should be the one to go and wouldn't, about guidance systems and he couldn't just walk out and Florence had been in the liquor again and Donna's books were all over the kitchen table . . .

He hardly glanced at me. "So talk."

"I heard him, Cal. I heard Davies talking about chemical warfare."

"He was talking about guidance systems, airplane control."

"In his head he was talking about systems to deliver things too dangerous for people to handle, chemical agents, nerve gas."

"And you heard him talking in his head," Cal said sarcastically. "I know you have a problem with your ears, but isn't that pushing it just a little?"

"I did, though." I didn't know how else to describe it. I didn't hear words; I simply knew what people were thinking, as if their thoughts were mine, all mixed together, random, disjointed, like my own but always separate. There was no way to explain it if he didn't do it also, and until that night I had believed everyone did it exactly the way I did, but with control and pretense that I had not yet mastered.

He looked up at me. His face changed, and for a time his mind was numb, then fear came. I shut my eyes. He thought I was crazy, that my parents had known, that's why they tied up the money the way they did, why they kept me home all those years, not fair, he should have been told . . . I turned and ran to the kitchen.

Cal went upstairs; soon there was the distant sound of water rumbling in the bathtub. Our house was ninety years old, and in spite of remodeling, the pipes still announced water running anywhere. Dad had bought the house when I was twelve, I had lived in it ever since—fifteen years. My mother and father had moved out here because they had known there was something wrong with me. Abruptly I started a pot of coffee. I had to rethink my entire life; it would be a long night.

But my thoughts were as jumbled as Cal's had been. Snatches of conversations came, phrases, ideas that had not been mine, answers that had been wrong, questions asked of me that had no answers . . . A carpenter had worked on the house when I was young; he hadn't known he was colorblind, he had told Mother, until they examined him for the Air Force. Mother said he believed he saw exactly what everyone else saw, and maybe no two people saw the same thing when they said green or blue or red. There was no way to tell. Later I read an article that claimed what we saw or heard was culturally determined, that the Japanese were culturally trained not to hear sounds made by others separated by nothing more than a paper wall. The article went on to say that people in major cities had to learn not to see others, not to see the chaos about them. I didn't know why people who wrote such lies were allowed to have them printed.

I began having school trouble in the fifth grade, and I failed sixth grade. They took me in for a medical checkup, an eye test; they took me to a psychologist. Did I hear voices? Did I see strange things? Did shapes change and become other things? I said the world was too noisy. She suggested a hearing test. The ear doctor said it was a problem with filtering; we have to learn how to filter noise, be attentive to what is important, squelch what isn't. I was giving everything the same attention. The problem wasn't in my ears, but in my brain.

Cal came back down in his robe and stood in the doorway, thinking Davies must have subvocalized what was really on his mind.

"He might have been subvocalizing," I said faintly.

I shared his relief. He was tired, the bath had relaxed him, too much stress recently, and tonight had been hard. He didn't linger; weak with relief, he went to bed.

How many times had I heard my mother say in exasperation, "I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. You think . . . " I believed she really knew. Later, when I realized what she said was not what Father was thinking, or what I was thinking, I concluded it was part of the same pattern that let people think certain words and voice others.

I drank coffee and paced through the downstairs: living room with antiques, dining room large enough to seat twelve, a den, laundry room . . . It was a very large house. They had bought and furnished it so that I never would have to go buy anything.

They decided to keep me home the year I was twelve, to tutor me themselves. Father was ill with Lou Gehrig's disease; he sold his share in an advertising agency in Seattle and we moved to this house, centered in six acres of woodland, eleven miles out of Portland. I could sleep at night again, and I stopped going into a near-paralytic state three or four times a day when the noise overcame me. There was no noise.

The phrase acute adolescent schizophrenia was in the air for a time, but they didn't take me for treatment. As long as I was home, I was perfectly well, and I was learning to cope with the world gradually. The process of turning the noise into white noise continued through the next few years until I could go to the library, go shopping or to the zoo or a movie with Mother, places where people were not thinking about me.

But if the focus turned to me, I froze, or I made a mistake and responded to a thought instead of a spoken word.

I gathered Donna's school books and put them in her backpack. Now what? I asked myself, but I couldn't form a thought about the future yet, not until I finished reexamining the past.

Father died when I was sixteen. I met Cal a year later, and his thoughts were clear, focused on me, and welcome. He was ten years older than I was, and he loved me. We married the day I turned eighteen, and Donna was born ten months later. I knew the instant I became pregnant; the noise faded to a murmurous hum far off in the distance. I told Mother it was gone, I was at peace, and we wept together.

She got an apartment in town, and talked about changing her will. She and Father had tied up everything in such a way that I would have an income for the rest of my life, and the house, with a trust to take care of it. If I sold the house, or took out a mortgage, the money would go into the trust fund. I had been provided for. With that act they had proclaimed what I now knew: they called it a problem with hearing, but they thought I was crazy.

The nine months of pregnancy were blissful; we entertained, and started to make friends; we lived just like other young couples. The day after Donna was born, I woke up drowning in the noise again. They took me home and Mother moved back in.

Mother was killed in a four-car collision on the interstate when Donna was nine months old, and I was pregnant again a month later. As before, the pregnancy curbed the noise, and, as before, the noise was back louder, more insistent than ever the day after Patty was born.

I had accepted that people considered me a social klutz, a little strange, weird even, but I thought of it as the sort of pity swimmers showed to non-swimmers; it was something anyone could do if they tried hard enough. Everyone else controlled the noise; I could learn to control it too.

It was four in the morning when I fell into bed, with no answer to Now what?

The clock rang at seven; I was so groggy I stumbled through making breakfast and told Donna she didn't need her hair braided, and didn't even try to respond to Cal's thoughts and words because I was not sure which was which.

A doctor, I thought, maybe a brain specialist. Maybe there was a treatment, a cure. I moved zombie-like through the usual morning chores—making beds, loading the dishwasher, picking up towels—and abruptly I stopped. Why? I found myself asking. Why should I risk doing such a thing?

I had only one answer: Cal was getting tired of a wife who was a social liability. But I couldn't tell anyone, because I would become a menace to be ostracized, or a medical curiosity to be studied and probed, or, I forced myself to follow the thought through, I would be put away under one pretense or another.

I shuddered thinking of what would happen if they put me in a hospital, tranquilized me; they would open the floodgates and listen to me scream.

Nothing had changed, I thought then; people would still consider me a little weird, a hearing problem, you know, but very intuitive. Funny how when a person is challenged in one area, a different area compensates, like the blind developing such a good sense of smell, the hearing impaired becoming more intuitive. . . . How many times I had heard such thoughts, both voiced and unvoiced. I repeated to myself, nothing had changed, except, I added, now I was aware.

Cal went to Los Angeles for three days. I did my stint at the school library, and I went to the public library twice while he was gone. I concentrated on psychology, on brain physiology, brain abnormalities . . . I read about aversion therapy, neurolinguistics theory on phobia handling, other theories, and I sat in the reading room and thought: *Here I am. Someone hear me. Make a sign that you hear me. I know what you're thinking*. People moved in and out of the book stacks, sat at the computers, talked to each other and the librarians. No one paid any attention to me.

Cal was tense and jumpy when he returned. He lied about his trip, about his meals, the presentation, everything. All went well, he said, but when he sank into silence, I learned just how badly it had gone. At first he blamed a bad hotel and bad food; then he blamed himself for not preparing better, for stumbling over some of the questions they had asked, and then he was blaming me. If I had come on better, not left Davies with the impression that I was a neurotic wife heading for a nervous breakdown, the rest would have worked okay. I listened to it happening in his head and could not say a word. For all I knew he was right.

After he went to bed, I began to analyze how I had handled his thoughts. They had been as jumbled as ever, but I had sifted through them, disregarding the irrelevant ones—he liked the chicken, his foot hurt, crush at the airport, bumpy landing, slob in the middle seat . . . I could do it automatically with Cal, just as I had done it with my parents. I knew their processes, could pick out their thoughts from the dense fog. If I had learned to do it with them, I could do it with others.

I started the next day. I chose a small coffee shop with half a dozen people in it at ten-thirty in the morning. For twenty minutes I nursed a cup of coffee and for the first time in my life I deliberately listened to the flow of thoughts that filled the air like radio waves. Not trying to squelch them, or turn them into white noise, but paying attention, I found that I could almost make them coherent. At the end of twenty minutes, my hands were shaking, my head hurt, and I had to leave, but I knew I had succeeded.

That night almost as soon as the girls were sleeping Cal and I went to bed. He had swung from dark pessimism to near euphoric optimism, and our lovemaking was exuberant and unrestrained. Our sex life had always been passionate, uninhibited. I knew exactly what he liked, and when he was joyous, delirious, so was I. That night, floating in the aftermath, I wondered suddenly what it would be like if both partners knew, and I was shocked by the thought. I was shocked again when I realized he was fantasizing a real woman. He sometimes fantasized while making love; usually his fantasy lover was a movie star, or someone from television, or an exotic dancer, someone unattainable and beautiful. Sometimes it was me in a foreign setting, on a bench, in a tent, sometimes even tinged with sadomasochism. That night it was a woman from the office who was in his mind as he drifted into deeper sleep.

People lived rich fantasy lives; I had grown used to that fact. Most of what people thought was never voiced. No one could control their flow of thoughts and ideas, impressions and feelings, desires and dislikes, hatreds, jealousies, loves; only their actions counted, and their spoken words. I knew this the way I knew people had dark hair or blond, or were tall or short, or fat or thin.

I had considered telling Cal about me; it really wasn't fair not to, he had a right to know. Lying there awake, I knew I couldn't. He wouldn't be able to live with me. And I knew that now, after nine years of marriage, he was thinking of other women in a way he never had before. I wasn't a good wife for him and never had been. Sex wasn't enough. That and the children were all that tied us together. It annoyed him if I mentioned something he was certain he had not talked about, like the time recently that I made a dental appointment for him. A tooth had been bothering him, but he didn't want to believe I knew it. He didn't want me to tell him things if he couldn't understand how I knew them, especially when I was right.

He was still denying to himself that it was getting harder to contain his frustration with a weird wife who was not good in company, and who made him uneasy in ways he couldn't comprehend. I had known for years that he was more relaxed with the children than with me, but I had assumed his reasons were like mine: the children weren't in his head.

What if they turned out to be like me, I thought, and this time my startlement made me get out of bed, slip on my robe and go downstairs.

Would they be like me? Cal believed my parents should have had me treated, not kept me hidden away and let whatever my problem was develop into a phobia about crowds. He would insist on a doctor who would drug the girls, tranquilize them, hospitalize them. . . . They would go insane, or die.

But I might not know for years. This hadn't started with me until I was nearly twelve. Then, finally, I began to plan seriously for the future.

I began going out nearly every day, small coffee shops at first, places where there would be few people, then a bigger restaurant, and finally a clothing store where I bought a few things. Constantly I repeated, I can do it. I can do it. I thought Cal would be pleased that I had bought myself a pant suit, but he was only annoyed. If I could shop, why had I messed around with catalogs for years? Why had he wasted so much time shopping? The company Davies represented had turned Cal and Harry down, no financial help was available although they had a good product, maybe in a year or two. . . . He blamed me.

Donna's birthday came and I had a party for her; a few mothers came along with their children, and I had a tea party for them. I can do it, I told myself. I can do it.

When school was out I took the children to the coast for a month as usual. Before, Cal had joined us every weekend, but that year he was too busy. He was having his affair finally. She was Audrey, the woman at work. And he was bitterly disappointed. I took a great deal of malicious satisfaction in his disappointment, and I wouldn't let him touch me until I was certain they had used condoms. They were together only three times; afterward he was overcome with guilt and shame that lasted for months.

At the coast, watching the girls play in the waves, I heard a man thinking about a boy. I had heard thoughts like this before, but always generalized, and he was very specific. I sat unmoving, terrified, and only gradually began to search for him. I had learned to track the droplets to their source part of the time, not reliably, and I thought I would not be able to locate him, but then I knew who it was. About thirty, thin, he was lying back on the sand supported by his elbows, less than twenty feet away, paying no attention to me, intent on the child. I located the boy next, a slight child of nine or ten, playing frisbee with his father.

The man was thinking of various scenarios when suddenly his thoughts turned more murderous, and he stood up. A woman and a large black dog had joined in the frisbee game. The boy threw the disk and the dog leaped up to catch it, trotted to the child to drop it at his feet, and stood tense and expectant waiting for the next throw. The predatory man was leaving, moving through the soft sand as fast as he could to the packed wet sand where he started to jog down the beach. I watched him out of sight.

But he would focus on another child, I thought, shivering. I lost control of the noise then. I had to get up and join the girls at the edge of the water, out of range of the dozen or so people who were clamoring for attention in my head.

That night I paced until I ached. I couldn't turn my back on such things, I told myself, but neither could I do anything about them. I thought bitterly of taking on the role of avenger, swooping down on unsuspecting criminals and dispatching them, or joining forces with the police, sniffing out evil and preventing crimes. I sat down and stared at the tabletop. Plastic with unlikely roses on trellises crisscrossed it. We had rented this same cottage every summer for eight years; the tablecloth had been here all that time.

The next day I bought a camera small enough to fit in my purse. If it happened again, I would take a picture and send it to the police, along with information about whatever the person was planning. I was afraid to try to do more than that. For the first time it occurred to me that someone, gangsters, the FBI, police, CIA, someone might decide to make use of me if they ever found out. Watching Donna and Patty trying to catch crabs in a tidepool, I knew how malleable I would be if they were ever threatened.

I practiced taking pictures, hiding the camera in my hand, behind my purse. I had six rolls of film developed when we returned home, and they were mostly terrible. I told the puzzled clerk the children had played with the camera and he thought that was a pretty expensive toy. I would learn photography, developing, printing, all of it, I decided on the spot.

When school started again, I enrolled in a photography class where several times I was desperate to drop out, but each time I was able to bring back the white noise and continue. Privately I learned my range, about forty feet; I learned how to turn the noise into coherent patterns; I learned how to track thoughts to a source reliably. I had a darkroom built in the basement and practiced taking pictures, developing, and printing them. I took hundreds of pictures of the trees on our property, and then began taking pictures of strangers in stores, in restaurants. Twice I sent a picture to the police with a note. Patty had her eighth birthday, Donna her tenth.

Cal and Harry found another potential backer and this time I gave the dinner party; I was charming, attentive, ignored all thoughts as if they were not there, and later I told Cal that Mr. Hendrickson was out to steal the program he and Harry were working on. Furious, he stalked out to spend the night with a woman named Jean.

When he came back the next evening, I had moved my things into my old childhood room. He glared at me in disbelief.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know as well as I do. You didn't even use a condom, did you? Who did she sleep with last week, last month? Did you ask? I believe they say you have to wait about six months and then do the blood test. Until then, separate rooms."

For the first time ever he wanted to hit me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do I have to spell it out? You're screwing around. There. Six months. Or you can leave now, tonight."

His old fear flashed back. He turned away. "You've changed," he muttered, walking toward the den where we kept the liquor.

We never had fought really. After our first argument I had realized that I would be too destructive. I knew exactly how to devastate him and if we argued I might say something awful and irreversible. For many years I had thought he could do the same to me, admired him for not giving in to the urge.

Now, after eleven years of not fighting with each other, his guilt was too strong for him to start. He thought of the house, no worries about food, about day-to-day living, my monthly allowance that made it possible. About Harry and June struggling along. About the girls, how much he loved them. Admit to a mistake, beg me to forgive him? But six months! Deny everything, he decided. I was suspicious, but I couldn't know for sure. I had always been a little crazy; there had been a few remissions, but here it was back, worse than before because now I was paranoid. Schizophrenic and paranoid.

By the time he had thought out his strategy, I was upstairs in my old room with the door locked.

We didn't mention it again. He continued to see Jean, and I slept with my door locked. I didn't want to force a confrontation with him, force him to leave. He was very good with the girls, and they loved him fiercely, and I felt oddly protective of him. It wasn't his fault that I knew what he was thinking, that he couldn't hide anything from me.

Donna turned twelve and was as normal as any little twelve year old girl could be; she cried at slights, or was manic, and experimented with makeup, and talked about boys with her friends, and thought about boys and makeup and dating. The day I realized I was hearing her thoughts, I knew she was not like me.

Now my attention turned to Patty, but again it was a waiting game. Cal and Harry had broken off their negotiations with Hendrickson. But then they licensed the program that had occupied them so long, and suddenly they were making a great deal of money. I was very happy for them.

Cal and Jean had a fight and broke up, and for several months he was as celibate as I was, and the thought crossed his mind now and then that the six months I had given him would be easy. But, he thought in surprise one night, he liked living the way he was. He didn't want to leave me exactly, but neither did he want to have to be on guard all the time, uneasy around me all the time. He liked sharing the house and the children, liked his meals, liked our inane conversations, liked everything about his life except being celibate, and eventually he took care of that.

I was strangely content also. It was all so much easier this way. Unexpectedly I had become involved with photography and worked at getting good at it. And every once in a while I took a picture of a stranger and wrote a note on the computer, printed it out, and sent it to the police. A man planning a big drug delivery. A woman robbing nursing home patients. A man planning murder. A child molester. . . .

Patty had her eleventh birthday and was growing moody, exactly the way Donna had, the way I had in the distant past.

I had been in the back of the lot, photographing a certain tree I had concentrated on for months, getting it in every possible light, because no matter how often I looked at it, it was a different tree I saw. I was trying to capture that elusive changeable aspect of all living things, the constant flux that seemed to bolster the notion that reality was being reinvented moment by moment.

I was taking off my boots at the back door when the doorbell rang. It was March; the boots were very muddy, my hands were frozen, my face numb. I finished with the boots before I went to answer the bell, still with my jacket on. I stopped short of the front door, policemen! Two of them. Detectives in plainclothes, cold and miserable. One of them was angry, the other was remote, thinking about the setting of our house, nice with so many trees, smart to keep them cleared back in case of fire . . .

I opened the door.

The older one said, "Mrs. Paterson? Detective Sergeant Lauria, and this is Detective Neilson." He held out identification. "May we have a few words with you?"

He was in his forties, heavy-set, nearly bald. He was thinking I looked like a kid in my socks and jacket, pink cheeks. The other one was young and lean, in his thirties, and very angry.

I stepped back. "Why? Is something wrong? Has there been an accident?" I knew better, but they expected something like that.

"Nothing happened," Lauria said. "We're trying to locate someone."

I led them into the living room and took off my jacket and we all sat down.

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Paterson, we're trying to find a connection among a group of people. Maybe you can help us. Would you mind telling us if you know any of the people whose names I'll mention?"

I shook my head. Neilson was furious because he was on this wild-goose chase. Two teenage girls had been slashed on Burnside, a gang shooting, goddamn Spaulding, chief had a hole in his head big enough to drive trucks through . . .

Lauria began to read from a list of names. I shook my head each time. But I was learning what they were after. I had sent in eleven pictures over a two-year period; he had seven of the names in his notebook. As he read the names, he made the connections in his head: the nursing-home attendant stealing patients' money; a child molester; a murderer . . . They had investigated seven of eleven. One of the names was Gerald Spaulding, who was stealing industrial secrets, selling them to the Japanese. At the mention of his name Neilson filled in the rest: someone had leaked to Spaulding that a nut had accused him, had taken his picture. Spaulding was a lobbyist, important, knew important people, he had demanded an investigation which had started four months earlier. Four months! Then Neilson began to fume again about this waste of time . . .

When Lauria asked me to look at some pictures, I agreed, because I didn't yet know how they had traced anything to me. I found out as he opened a briefcase, extracted a manila envelope, and took out the first picture. In my photography class we had done a series of sports shots, using fast action film, ISO 1600, what the instructor called recording film. Now I found out that it was rarely used, that it usually was specially ordered, but kept in stock by the store I had gone to because our classes asked for it. They had been tracking down everyone in Portland and the surrounding area who had bought it over the past three years. I was one of dozens of people they were following up on. Not just me, then, I realized, relieved.

I shook my head at the first picture, a late one. Then an earlier one, and another. The quality improved I thought distantly, studying them, as I got better with the camera and darkroom technique. Finally I said, "I don't know any of those people." I stood up.

Something was bothering Lauria; he was dissatisfied with me for no reason he could think of except that I was taking this too calmly. "Mrs. Paterson, do you use ISO 1600 film?" he asked, getting to his feet. He agreed with his partner that this was a waste of time, but still, there was something . . .

"No," I said sharply. "And I don't intend to answer any more questions unless you tell me what you want, why you're here." His suspicions eased a little.

"Could we have a quick look at your darkroom?" he asked.

"No. I'm going to call my lawyer if you don't leave now."

I walked to the door with them, but suddenly Lauria was thinking about another case of a nut informer who was said to have been right with every suspect he fingered. I caught my breath.

"Sergeant, wait a minute," I said with my hand on the doorknob. "I guess I don't care if you look at my darkroom, or my photographs, if that's part of your job." Neither of them noticed how strange I sounded.

Neilson was furious with this new delay, and Lauria was less than enthusiastic now that I had agreed to show them everything. He knew at a glance that my trees were not at all like the grainy head shots, but I kept showing them more and more trees and bushes and blades of grass, and all the time getting a snippet here, another there.

When they left I sat down to think. I was in no danger of discovery. Early on I had found my own reflection in a car bumper in a practice photograph; after that I examined them very carefully, and cropped them if there was anything to give me away. I wore thin vinyl gloves in the darkroom, no fingerprints. None on the computer paper or the envelopes, bought in a discount store.

At first the police had paid little attention to the tips. The third picture, of a bank embezzler, had made them change their minds and reexamine the first two. By now they had found six of the people, had made arrests in five instances, and were investigating the sixth. Four remained elusive, and then there was Spaulding.

There had been high-level meetings. Not an extortion setup, they had decided, although that was what Spaulding claimed to believe. At one of the meetings someone had mentioned the similiarity to a case back east, except that nut had not used pictures, but gave actual names. And he was right every time. I had been desperate to find out where back east, and finally Lauria had thought about how they had handled it in Cincinnati. They had decided it was the work of an insider, and made everyone in the department from the chief down take a polygraph test; there had been resignations and general turmoil since most of the force had no idea why.

I didn't know when all that happened. Cincinnati. As foreign as India or Morocco. Was she still there, still doing it? I didn't know.

I felt feverish and more than a little crazy then, thinking about someone like me out there. I had broadcast my message over and over: *Look at me, hear me. I'm here. I know what you're thinking.* Then I had given up; no one could hear me.

I couldn't remember the last time I had had a real conversation with anyone; I felt stupid responding to half-truths, evasions, lies as if I believed them. But there was someone in Cincinnati, I thought all through the afternoon, into the evening. I made dinner as usual and listened to the girls chatter, and to Cal going on about a car he had test driven earlier that week, and I felt like a spectator in my own house, watching my life erode away.

I spent time in the library again; I read about Cincinnati, about Ohio, studied a map of the city. Where did she live? Had she gained as much control as I had? Was she married? Had she stopped tipping off the police? How had she got the actual names of the suspects? Most people hardly ever thought of their own names. What if it was a man? The idea made my legs give, I had to sit down. *What would it be like if they both knew?*

For several years I had known that Donna was trying to hide her ambivalent feelings about me, and I had accepted that as the normal growing up process of an adolescent girl. They get critical of their mothers, I told myself; they get judgmental; they prefer their fathers. . . . Both girls knew Cal and I weren't sleeping together; they knew he had a girlfriend, and had even met her, and we all pretended none of that was true, although the girls talked about it privately, and Donna thought about it a lot.

They were in their room one afternoon in May; I was on my way to my room when I passed their door and came to a stop. Their voices were too low to carry, but I realized I was hearing both of them in my head. I leaned against the wall with my eyes closed; the waiting was over. Now I knew.

Donna was thinking that if we got divorced she wanted to live with her father, and Patty was thinking about Stella, the girlfriend, how easy it was to talk to her, how she understood. For the first time I realized they were as uneasy around me as Cal was, it was not simply adolescence driving a wedge.

I wanted to cry as the realization came. I had failed Cal and my children alike. In spite of all my care, they knew there was something wrong. Donna thought I was a little crazy. She thought I spied on her, read her diary; I couldn't tell her otherwise since I wasn't supposed to know that. Now Patty thought she didn't blame Cal: I was a little creepy, not a bit like Stella. I moved away, but then it hit me: I was free.

It was all very civilized. I waited until school was out to tell Cal I was leaving him; he was grateful that I was the one to bring it up. We discussed it calmly with the girls and they said they wanted to go with him. We talked about custody, visitation rights, college tuition costs, everything, and left little for an attorney to do. Just like that, it was over. The girls cried and I did, and Cal was uncomfortably near tears, but we all were relieved.

The next day I packed suitcases, packed my camera bags, and I left for Ohio. I would take a long trip, I told them all, leave them in peace to make their arrangements. We all cried again, but when I drove off, I felt a great excitement, exhilaration even.

The enormity of the land amazed me, the desert, mountains, then the plains that stretched forever. I drove until I got tired, ate when I got hungry, slept in motels or hotels, and drove again. I had thought I would plan everything during the days of driving, the restless nights wishing it were morning again. My excitement mounted but the only plan that formed was simply to visit public places—the library, the zoo, parks, and keep calling until you answered: *Hear me. See me. Speak to me. I know you're here. I know what you're thinking.* ●

DINOSAUR HIGHWAY

It's been millions of
years and the sage of the high
western plains have all covered
it. But in the night's
quiet when the memory

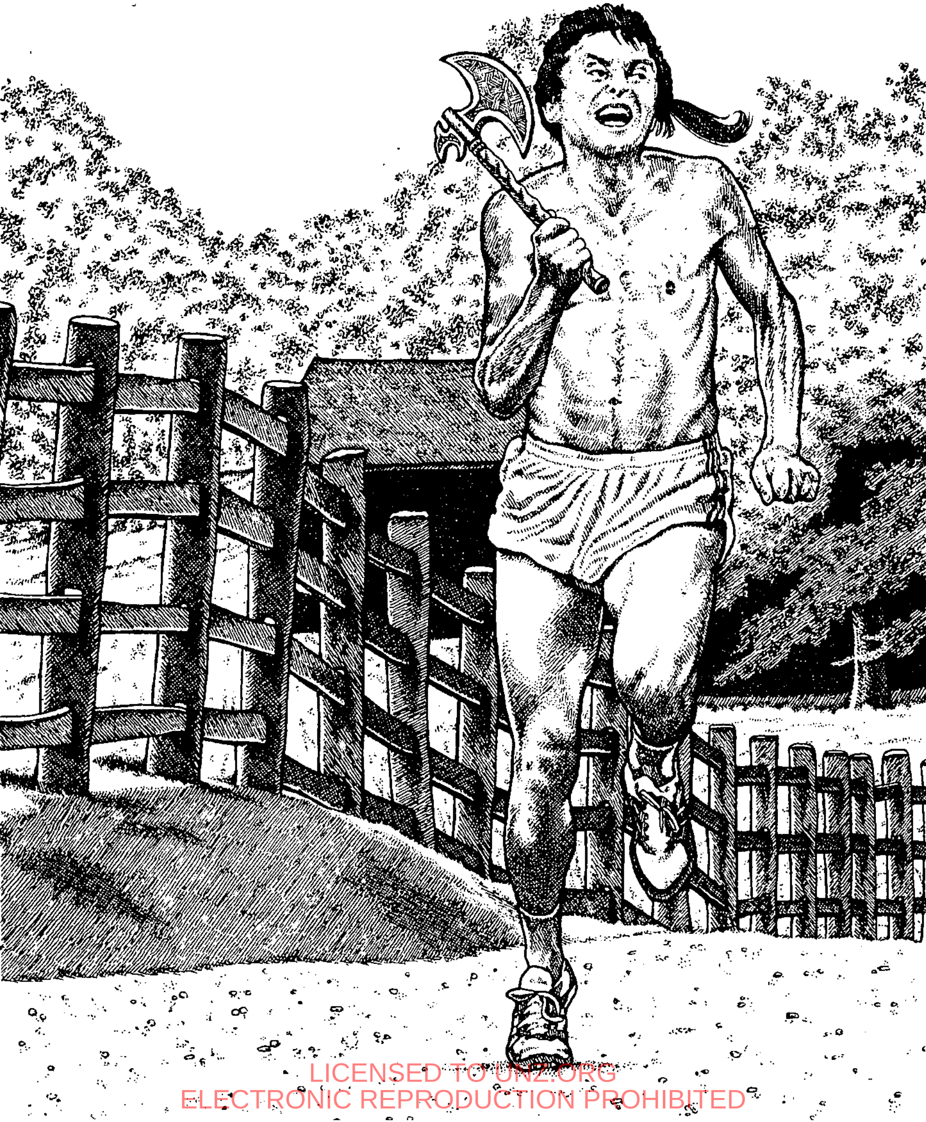
of the buffalo
and the mammoths have faded
from the soil, you can see the
bones of dead rivers
marked with stony footprints.

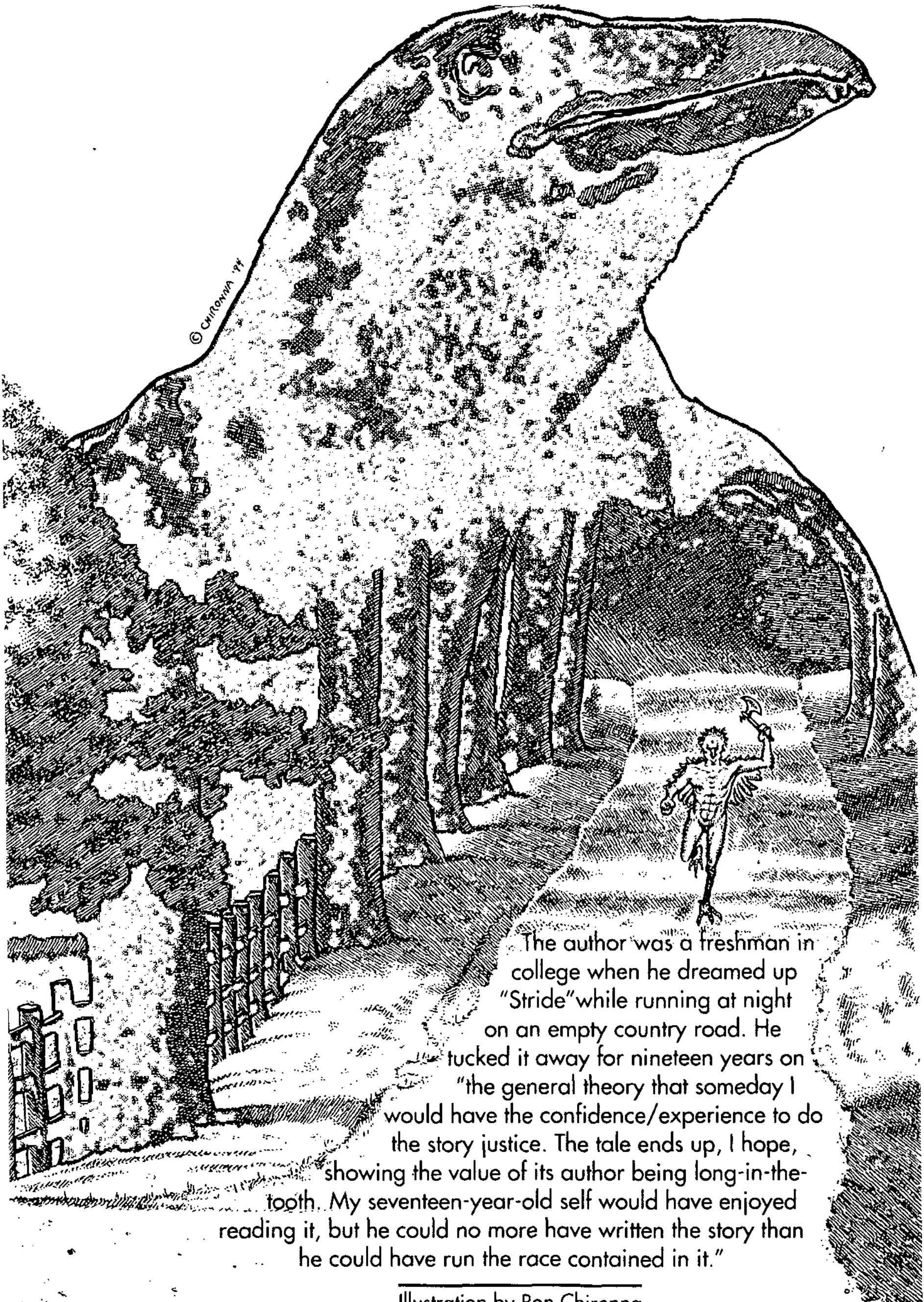
Put your ear to the
ground. Fossil sounds tell you where
it once was, route of giants:
dinosaur highway.
Echoes are still shaking the night.

—Scott E. Green

Robert Reed

STRIDE





The author was a freshman in college when he dreamed up "Stride" while running at night on an empty country road. He tucked it away for nineteen years on "the general theory that someday I would have the confidence/experience to do the story justice. The tale ends up, I hope, showing the value of its author being long-in-the-tooth. My seventeen-year-old self would have enjoyed reading it, but he could no more have written the story than he could have run the race contained in it."

Illustration by Ron Chironna

Phillip finds himself awake, finds himself running, mid-stride and charging hard down the left rut of a little ranch road; and he stops and turns, and turns, confusion becoming panic and someone close uttering a shrill moan. Then he realizes that he's moaning. Nobody else is here. And he shuts his mouth, feeling dizzy and weak and wondering:

Where is this?

It looks like the hill country, tall brown grasses moving under a gusting southerly wind. His panic bleeds into a broader, more muscular fear. The sky is high and blue-white with high clouds, the sun not far from the horizon, and which is it? Morning or afternoon? The air is hot and late-day muggy. It must be afternoon. But what day? Glancing at his left wrist, he finds that his watch is gone, a pink untanned band obvious against his brown forearm. And he remembers wearing other clothes, nothing on him now but his black nylon shorts and his racing flats with the new socks . . . *who did this* . . . ? and clenched in his right hand is a stick, short and lightweight—

—not a stick, no. A weapon. The wooden handle has knobs shaped for his fingers, for both hands, plus little symbols that resemble tiny neat and stylized bones. Under a leather sheath is a long paper-thin blade made from gray-blue metal. He touches the serrated edge once, then replaces the sheath and sucks at his own cut thumb. "Shit." And again he turns, slowly this time, examining the horizon and the grass, searching for odd motions or a certain shape. He finds neither. Yet Phillip has the clear impression that he is being watched, someone to the east. He was running west when he awoke, some piece of him lucid enough to keep him upright, legs churning; and for no obvious reason now he lifts his weapon, the axe, holding it overhead with both arms straightened, something about the stance formal, almost ritualistic, some half-remembered voice telling him:

"Once you are conscious, turn to show me. Stand this way. This way is holy. And then we truly begin. This will be our starter's pistol."

He remembers more than the voice, startling himself, dropping the axe and backing away from it. Why did he do it? A scalding and clean and focusing rage begins, telling him that he should have kept running, feigning sleep . . . and in the same instant Phillip understands that he couldn't have, that he had no choice, that the instructions were given while he was in a powerful drugged state. Then he realizes that by standing here, doing nothing, he is assuring his own death . . . and he picks up the axe again, turns and runs, almost sprinting down the little road.

"Bless you," said the remembered voice. Then in another language, with a hard chattering sound, it must have said the same words again. "Bless you, bless you."

Phillip remembers the touch of hands, claws dimpling the skin of his neck and the breath close, warm and damp and steady. And he remembers the face inches from his face, smiling black eyes staring at him, the voice deep and rough and strange as it said:

"Bless the meat."

Then:

"Run."

Like never in his life, the meat runs.

It was after high school, after his family disowned him for all time. It was after that business with the liquor stores, Phillip driving the car and testifying against his buddy to save his own ass. And it was after going through rehab twice, coming out clean at last. After all that, and he was barely nineteen, and someone said to Phillip, "What you ought to do is try running. It's better than drugs, I've heard, and it's legal too."

The idea sounded reasonable. Phillip needed something to do with his time, and jogging would at least make him fit. But he began badly, wearing the wrong type of shoes and training without any plan, believing that running was one thing and covering ground was all that mattered. It isn't. Yet he had help from his lean build and his youth, surviving a couple of early knee injuries and eventually improving despite himself.

The best runners are built from the same blueprints, narrow hips and long legs and deep, lung-rich chests. Greyhounds and Kenyans have much in common, and Phillip resembles both in his essential lines and his strong innate stride, nothing but breathing more natural than the act of running. And despite himself, he succeeded. Entering his first race on a whim, he ran with the lead pack because he thought that was the point of racing: You run to win and for as long as possible. Phillip managed to stay with the leaders for a mile, in basketball shoes, draining himself and collapsing into a shuffling jog. Several hundred cautious souls passed him before the finish line, cheerfully telling him, "Stick with it. You look strong." *The bastards.* But afterward Phillip finally bought proper shoes and shorts and a couple of "how-to" guides. He read about intervals and long runs and hard-days, easy-days. Then he began using his old high school track for his intervals. In those days the track was unpaved, cinders crunching with every footfall, and Phillip usually had the track to himself. He was twenty or twenty-one, and there was an evening—a windy and muggy evening like this one—where he was running hard, an audience watching him intently.

Crows. There were a dozen big, big crows, squawking and cawing among themselves. And one crow was perched on the old drinking fountain, the black head dipping every so often. Phillip barely noticed it until he took a break, trotting over for a drink and the crow not eager to leave.

It gave him a long cawing curse before settling on the nearby grass, glaring at him. Phillip has never forgotten the moment. The fountain's drain was plugged up, probably by kids, and the steel bowl was filled with cloudy pink water. Phillip froze, blinked and stared. The crow had caught a young ground squirrel and butchered it in the bowl, blood and fur and bits of candy-bright guts making a delicious cold soup.

Disgust became a kind of disgusted fascination, the moment having a bizarre spiritual feel about it.

Bending and squinting, Phillip could see how the squirrel's eyes had been neatly chiseled from their sockets, probably eaten as delicacies. And the crow gave him another harsh caw, its voice urgent and the meaning obvious.

"Mine, mine, mine!" it was shouting.

Phillip retreated, his thirst gone. The crow picked up its prize and flew away, chased by the others; and fifteen years later, the same crows and their descendants still perch on the bleachers and high fences. Today the track is paved, runners using it almost every evening. Crows like the place because it has water and stupid ground squirrels and edible trash in big steel barrels, and because they like to watch the humans run in circles, sometimes staggering, their hope of hopes being that some evening one of the runners will collapse and die for them.

"Dibs on the eyes!" they say. Or words to that effect. "Dibs dibs dibs on the big sweet eyes!"

Deer are browsing partway up the hillside, up ahead—big mule deer enjoying the evening—and they lift their heads together, watching Phillip cruise along the ranch road. At least they look like mules, he thinks. In principle, they could be anything that's possible, and this could be any possible place; and it's no small relief that this is his Earth, his home, maybe no more than thirty miles between here and his apartment door.

A manageable distance.

A fucking piece of cake.

Phillip feels strong, rested. Plenty of pop in the legs. His early pace has slowed to something more measured, more controlled, old habits emerging from the initial shock. The sun has just set, the western sky full of red dust, and he grows more alert as the light fails. Is there a moon? Yeah, for a while. It's the moon he expects, half-lit and one-eyed, and that's also reassuring. He's running on familiar ground, under his sky, following this road back to its source, hoping to find a ranch house or a larger road where he can get help.

Piece of fucking cake.

Suddenly the deer begin to run, bounding downhill with a graceful easy strength; and Phillip watches them, tension building before his mind can find the reason for tension, a gloomy internal voice asking:

"What spooked them?"

Because he didn't. Because the deer are coming in his general direction, leaping over a low barbed wire fence and crossing the road in front of him, close enough that he can hear hooves on the packed earth, then in the grass. And they're past, continuing down into a stand of wild plums and shadow, then gone, a sense of motion and residual life hanging in the air.

What spooked them . . . is over the hill. . . .

Phillip stops for an instant, squinting and gasping. And waiting. Nothing shows itself, but he has no doubts. For a moment he thinks of following the deer, trying to hide among them; but changing direction is too difficult to consider. In the dark, in this country, he'd rather use the relatively good footing of the road. What's best is to move fast, picking up his pace, assuming that help is somewhere close and holding nothing back now.

He gives the axe to the other hand, running again; and with a downward glance he notices hoofprints in the soil, fresh as fresh can be, shaped by Nature for this kind of panicked flight.

Humans are wondrous runners.

Phillip once read that it's bullshit, pure bullshit, when people claim that people are lousy athletes. It's a lie started by and for snobs and fat-asses. The truth is that few critters can cover ground like a healthy well-trained *Homo sapiens*. Still fewer can manage it in the heat and under a midday sky, humans built for and tested on the huge expanses of African savanna, and the best human runners are born there today.

Oh, sure. Your basic cheetah is three times faster over the short haul. But it's got quick-twitch muscles, like every sprinter, and tiny lungs that can't keep the engines burning for more than a minute or two. And for half an hour after its big run, the cheetah pants like a maniac, dropping heat and gulping oxygen while some lithe and steady young Bushman robs him of his kill.

Naked flesh; abundant sweat glands; and a huge heat-radiating brain. Human beings were capable of astonishing runs long before they built fancy spears and spaceships.

For the last fifteen years, almost without exception, Phillip has run from seventy to one hundred and twenty miles every week, each of those runs recorded in a log book, every year's mileage totaled and analyzed and criticized and enshrined.

For the last dozen years, with no exceptions, Phillip Krause has been the local champion runner. The town's races are his personal possessions.

On the good days he wins the larger regional events. On his best days he has gone to the line with giants—Olympic-caliber stallions—once breaking twenty-nine minutes in a 10K, chasing Bill Rodgers into the last mile.

If only, he has thought countless times.

If he only could have been more fit, more flexible. More focused.

If only, only, only he hadn't ingested the chemicals and avoided exercise during his ugly youth.

Sometimes Phillip imagines himself running in high school, then college—a prime Division I school—with coaches who would have given him opportunities without making him burn out. Good press and racing the best Americans would have won him attention. And Phillip hasn't the feeblest doubt that he would have won in a fair world, victories bringing the spoils: Corporate sponsors and shoe contracts and fat, fat appearance fees.

Could have happened and should have, and didn't.

His real fame is a smaller, more intimate kind. Almost everyone in the little city of Forrestal knows Phillip by sight, if not by name. He's the lean and strong long-legged maniac out running every day, in blizzards and hail and blistering heat, the black hair worn long and tied into a ponytail, the weathered face always serious, always focused, with eyes that local runners have dubbed:

"Bruce Dern eyes."

Obsessed. Passionate. Almost crazed.

Phillip isn't exactly friendless. There are always people who gather around someone of remarkable skill, ignoring their shortfalls in order to breathe the same air. The trick with Phillip, say his admirers, is to pretend that he was raised by wolves. It's not that he's intentionally abrupt or distant, no. He just doesn't understand the subtleties of normal conversation, or its power. Having given his entire life—energy and focus and intellect—to a single pursuit, he doesn't have room for normal friendship or anything like love.

He has a famous temper, incandescent and sudden.

And the truth is that some people pity him. Phillip is thirty-five years old, muscles filling with rust and the elasticity leaving his poor hamstrings; and they watch his tantrums after bad races, wondering what happens when his times truly slow. What happens when he can't win even the local races? When some college kid, young enough to be his son, crushes him without so much as a backward glance?

That's what slower, wiser runners ask each other, watching Phillip run scorching laps at the high school track.

How can such a creature survive being slow?

* * *

Moonlight betrays motion on his left, which is where he expects it. But when he turns his head, looking straight at his sudden companion, the cones of his eyes can't resolve anything but a long reach of whispering grass.

Phillip jerks his head forward, lifting his pace again.

And again he sees the figure running in the tall grass, paralleling him, the corners of his eyes able to resolve a general shape and the stride, both of them recognizable.

His belly tightens, almost paining him.

For an instant Phillip wonders if he's going to lose control of his bowels, horribly embarrassing himself on top of everything. But the pressure passes with a fart, and he gasps, and he looks over at the figure, this time not quite staring at it, letting the light-sensitive rods of his eyes resolve an image.

The figure moves faster, its stride long and easy. In moonlight it seems only half-real, composed partly of ghostly substances, weightless and perfect for a runner.

It's jockeying closer to the road now.

Phillip can hear it. He hears the bare legs in the grass and the occasional grunt, and again he looks ahead, able to resolve a line of silvery somethings that become fenceposts and a gate—no, not a gate, but a gap in the fence—and the quicker runner will reach the gap first, by at least fifty yards.

Phillip stops running, and he thinks to lift the axe, using both hands but forgetting to remove the leather sheath. In the wood of the handle he can feel his heart, the beats too fast to count. His opponent comes up onto the road and turns, almost strutting, holding an identical axe in one hand, the blade glistening like water.

Phillip stares at the face.

Even at this range, in moonlight, he knows what he sees. *A Terror.* The face is narrow and beaked with feathers in place of hair—a shaggy blood-colored mass of feathers growing on the head and neck and shoulders and back—and a naked body painted with ceremonial spearheads, simple and ancient. The tail is hidden behind it, abbreviated and vaguely reptilian. The legs are long, ending with long clawed feet, and the feet begin to scratch at the bare earth, kicking up dust clouds. And with a sense of ceremony the Terror lifts its axe toward the partial moon, chanting with a shrill piercing voice, the language unintelligible but rhythmic, almost familiar somehow.

Ancient gods are being invoked, he senses.

And Phillip lowers his axe, saying, "Fuck you," as he turns, sprinting north toward the nearest hill.

* * *

RUNNING LOG:
Date—6/10 Weight—145 Pulse—46
Course—Forrestal track
Description—Mile repeats (6, 10 miles overall)
Comments—Fair pace, pop; arch sore; 4:50s, 4:39 last one; new runner, Nash something—quick, odd

There were half a dozen other runners at the track, mostly plodders, and Phillip did his usual best to ignore them. It was a cool evening for June, the air dry and smelling of newly mowed grass. It wasn't until after his first hard mile when he noticed the white Mercedes parked in the student lot. Whose was it? He tried to remember if it was there when he arrived, and he couldn't remember, finishing his one-lap rest and hitting the *Start* button on his watch, launching into his second scorching mile.

Seventy-two seconds per quarter, give or take. Phillip has a sense for pace, innate and rarely wrong. Except for the occasional hot pain in his right arch, he felt fine. Strong, smooth. He hit the *Stop* button as he finished, guessing 4:50 before he glanced at the numbers. 4:51. Not quite fast enough, he thought. He'd let his concentration slip, and yesterday's hard fourteen miles weren't helping. Trotting now, he felt a general ache in his legs, circling back around to the starting line and sometimes glancing through the high chain-link fence, the white Mercedes still sitting in the open.

Smoked glass windows, he noticed. Out-of-state plates, which made sense. Forrestal was a relatively small city, and conservative, and this wasn't any car that he recognized as local. Then he quit thinking about it, concentrating on his next mile . . . running it in his head before he began. *Beep.* His right foot ached on the first turn, his pace suffering. He didn't need his watch to know that he was a couple of seconds slow on the first lap, a flicker of anger making him focus, pushing him through the second lap, then the third one, coming around in full stride and all at once noticing that someone had emerged from the mystery car.

Even at a distance, the man looked odd. Wrong. He was tall with big shoulders and narrow hips and a long pair of legs. He was wearing some kind of warm-up, ugly green and shiny. A Ben Hogan green. The face was pale, reddish-blond hair cut short; and Phillip glanced at the face as he ran past, feeling something unsettling. Or maybe not. Maybe it was his imagination or the exhaustion, he reasoned. And with that he did his last lap, finishing with a surge and hitting *Stop* and grimacing as he eased into a gentle, healing trot.

The stranger was watching him, apparently smiling as he shut his door with a solid Mercedes *thunk*. Phillip refused to notice. He was busy trying to bring life back into his legs, busy telling himself that he was halfway done and only three more and god, he felt strong. And when he came around again he realized that the stranger was running, still wearing the warm-up, taking the first run as Phillip began his fourth mile.

Of course he'd catch the stranger. He had no doubts, taking the first lap too fast, crushing seventy seconds and paying for it. The gap did close somewhat, but the guy had some spark in him, some power, and Phillip finished in the rear, managing a ragged 4:51 that left him shuffling the inner lane. And then the stranger passed him, no warning given. There wasn't the usual slap of feet on the soft asphalt, the tall and lean and obviously strong figure passing on his right, never speaking, perhaps not even breathing, surprising Phillip enough to make him jump sideways, twisting in mid-air and lifting his hands.

He felt like a fool. Scared for no reason.

Again he started to trot along, anxiety making his legs shake. The stranger was half a lap ahead when he finally pulled up, and Phillip watched him climb partway up the bleachers, scaring off one of the eternal crows. There he sat, legs stretched out in front of him and appearing relaxed, at ease, with his eyes fixed on Phillip. Always.

Two more, Phillip thought. Almost done.

He managed the fifth mile in an anemic 4:53.

"Shit," he shouted, ignoring the audience. Staring at the track and his feet, he thought how he needed new shoes and insoles. They'd help his sore arch. Then he came back around and realized that he had company, the stranger having climbed down onto the track again, standing in his lane, still wearing the ugly warm-up—pants and a long-sleeved hoodless shirt—and watching Phillip, eyes large and dark and somehow, even through fifty yards of twilight, odd.

Phillip kept moving. The air felt cool, soothing. He concentrated on breathing, then had the peculiar thought that the stranger was going to fight him, that they must have met somewhere and he held a grudge—not the only runner who could claim that status—and just as Phillip wondered what to say, if anything, the stranger broke the silence, asking:

"May I join you?"

He had a thick voice, ragged and a little slow, with the hint of an accent. Or maybe a speech impediment.

Phillip responded by coughing, tasting iron at the back of his throat. "Guess so," he allowed. *It's a public track—*

—and the stranger stepped out of his way, almost smiling.

"I'm doing a mile," Phillip told him.

The stranger let him begin, giving him a couple strides before engaging whatever engine it was that powered him. Phillip didn't hear him. He concentrated on keeping himself under control, feeling a deep twinge from the balky arch; then his opponent was cutting past him on the first backside, that effortless stride carrying him, the fabric of his warm-up giving a rhythmic dry crack. Phillip managed the first lap in the mid-sixties, he guessed. The second lap was faster and twice as painful. Then the third was slower, Phillip burying himself deep inside anaerobic metabolisms, lactic acids made by the bucket and pooling inside his rubbery old legs.

The stranger was toying with him, keeping a constant lead. And Phillip massaged his ego with thoughts of how this was a workout, not a race, and how this bastard hadn't run as far as him tonight. He was some kind of speed merchant. A track-head. And this meant nothing at all.

A sudden backward glance startled Phillip.

The narrow face grinned, the expression full of arrogance. And Phillip knows arrogance, having produced more than his share in life. *Fuck you,* he thought, and he surged, the legs driving even as they ran out of oxygen, him halving the distance on the last lap and the fucker responding by putting himself into some new, heretofore unseen gear, legs blurring and Phillip left far behind.

Frustration bled into an intense, tightly focused rage.

The stranger stopped early, perhaps forgetting where they'd started. Phillip kept pressing, thighs burning and the air useless and his tight angry voice grunting, "Track," as he streaked past, not moving far enough to his right and their elbows clipping one another, bone to bone, the pain barely worth noticing on top of every other misery.

And he finished, his hand remembering to stop his watch and the rest of him gasping, then shuffling out onto the grass of the practice field. He decided to throw up, bending at the waist in preparation; but the nausea became a general gassy sensation, almost manageable. More hard breathing cured him of the discomfort, leaving him mobile and a little ashamed. Just a little. Then he knelt and reached inside his right shoe, massaging the arch—plantar facitis is a brutal, long-term, hard-to-cure ailment—and only gradually did he become aware of his companion. Dark green shoes blended into the grass—what brand?—and he lifted his eyes, finding the stranger's face smiling again and a long hand extending, the mouth opening and saying, "Nash," two times.

"Nash?" said Phillip.

"And you are?"

There was an accent, plus a speech impediment—very slight—with the hard R faltering inside that blue-black voice. Phillip gave his full name, halfway expecting Nash to say, "I've heard of you." But he didn't, looking off in a random direction, not watching Phillip as he said:

"Phillip," with too much care.

What I need . . . is to move. . . .

Nash joined him, not invited but not told to leave either. Trotting around the first turn, Phillip glanced at him several times, in profile, wondering about his nationality—German? Scottish?—and entertaining a fantasy where Nash was a world-class athlete who had come here to race him. A sweet image, wasn't it? And he wondered about his age, realizing that he looked younger than his voice and general bearing. Twentysome? And then they were on the backside, Nash turning his head and smiling as he asked:

"Shall we drink?"

Phillip said nothing.

"I need to drink," his new friend confessed.

The old water fountain was at the south end of the track, beside the second turn. No crows on it tonight, but just the same Phillip felt uneasy. His own water was in a plastic bottle hidden under the bleachers. He could almost taste it, watching Nash step onto the grass; and Phillip had no choice but to warn him, "That water's no good."

Nash paused, asking why not.

He told the story, in brief, waiting for Nash to become disgusted. But if anything, he seemed intrigued, offering an odd little smile and a soft laugh.

The drain was plugged, as always. The broad steel bowl was filled with water, a steep nipple standing in the center, maybe an inch above the water's surface. Nash stepped on the pedal and bent at the waist, the flow short, barely sturdy enough to rise off the metal. Yet he drank, the head down for a long while, slurping and swallowing; and Phillip watched the pale slick back of the neck, his own disgust holding steady. Finally Nash stood up and belched with authority, turning to Phillip and saying:

"Have some."

It wasn't a question.

In the next few weeks, as events mounted, Phillip would recall the man's tone and expression, challenging him with that wrong-sounding voice, two words elevating this stupid act into some kind of manhood test.

"Have some," he repeated. Demanded.

Phillip made himself do it. Nash depressed the pedal for him, standing over him while he bent and drank. The water was warm and bland, and what was left over in the bowl was almost clear, Phillip telling himself that what he was drinking had to be clean and there was nothing to worry about and then noticing something move, swirling under his nose, long and thin and without color. Drifting in the bowl was a washed-out noodle-like length of artery, and Phillip stopped drinking, standing with a certain slow dignity, then managing a small inadequate belch.

Nash was smiling, and he wasn't.

That face was too thin, like a greyhound's face, and the skin was too smooth and milky and hairless as an egg; and later, remembering the moment for the thousandth time, Phillip would think of those eyes and how they reminded him of crow eyes, intense and powerful, and malicious, and black in a manner that made them glow with an inner light.

He attacks the hill, not looking back, pressing and pressing and discovering a reserve, a potent new gear, that lifts him to the crest without destroying him.

And he slows, glancing over a shoulder—

—better than a hundred yards between them, the Terror leaning into the grade where it's steepest, for an instant, and Phillip wondering if it can be tired. What if it has limits after all?

What was he taught?

This rite, this ceremony, is intended to be dangerous. When the Terror isn't assured victory at the outset, then this is the perfect and noble chase of worthy meat. . . .

Me . . . the worthy meat. . . .

The grass on top of the hill has been grazed thin and dried out by the winds, the ground beneath stony and uneven. Phillip thinks of waiting over the crest, dropping and waiting to ambush the Terror, finishing everything now. But the legs vote otherwise, churning hard and extending themselves on the downhill slope, hips tilting forward, the balls of his feet and his shins absorbing the jarring impacts.

He imagines water flowing on the hillside, and he follows the imagined stream, lifting his gaze, mapping his course up the next long moonlit climb.

A couple of days after the mile repeats—after Nash—Phillip was awakened by a hard professional knock on his door. He has a tiny, tiny apartment, ascetic and suitable. Daylight showed through gaps in the curtains. Posters showed famous marathoners in victory stances. What time was it? Noonish. His right foot had stiffened while he slept, like always, and he grimaced and pulled on the nearest shorts, limping to the door as the knocking quit and finding a uniformed figure smiling in the hallway.

"Hope I'm not bothering you."

UPS. The delivery man smelled of cigarettes and industrial cologne. Until Phillip signed his name, they were the best of friends. In exchange for his signature he received a small box wrapped in brown paper and tape, the return address smudged. Unreadable.

Phillip growled and shut the door, then tore into the paper, waking as he worked. Dark green letters spelled the word STRIDE, on top and on the sides. Inside the box was a single round canister, sealed with foil and a plastic lid. STRIDE was written on its face, in the same flowing style, and rubber-banded around it was a cover letter that began:

"A gift for you, Phillip Krause, in recognition of your talents as an athlete."

A free sample, he realized. And not the first one either. Phillip always enjoyed this warm sense of success, as if his grueling work was aimed at these occasional gifts. STRIDE, he read, was a new and innovative electrolyte replacement drink, fructose and complex carbos mixed with essential minerals and amino acids, plus a delightful citrus taste too. In theory.

Piss would have tasted better, he decided. But when he mixed his test batch with diet pop it became manageable. Even palatable. He finished a big glass before returning to bed, then lay awake for a long while, aware of a warmth spreading from his belly and the steady unhurried beating of his heart.

He awoke around five o'clock, ran an easy eight, then put the bad foot into a bucket of ice water. Phillip's latest job was night watchman at a local factory, fourteen months of service being something of a personal best for him. It was easy, solitary work, and it made the rent. But that night, dressing in the ridiculous uniform, he suddenly felt dizzy and weak. The apartment took on a tilt, just for a few minutes. An illness? Or a brain tumor? Yet it passed, and by morning he was strong enough to run a solid eighteen, taking a favorite course to the east of Forrestal, past the last of the farms and into the open green hill country.

It was a warm day, even before nine o'clock.

Pausing at the crest of a long hill, at the turnaround point, he pulled his water bottle from its padded belt, sucking down a long curing dose of STRIDE.

The taste had grown on him.

Piss, but premium piss. And he turned and started home, started downhill, the right foot warm and loose and happy.

On the third hill the legs start to feel the slope and the pace, and Phillip discovers that he can take his pulse when he places his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It's a warning, an old trusted one, and he decides what to do as he comes over the crest, one more backward glance and his lead diminished to eighty yards and little choice left for him. He finds an abbreviated gully where he hunkers down low and waits, breathing too hard and watching for the Terror and not waiting for long. There is no one, then there is. It appears before him, that clean strong gait slowing in an instant, the face dropping, the eyes finding something of interest in the hard stony ground.

Moving too quickly, Phillip removes the leather sheath from the long axe blade.

Moving too surely, the Terror turns and starts to walk toward him, the head always down and Phillip telling himself to charge him now, to catch the monster before it can react—

—and the Terror pauses, eyes lifting, easily able to see everything despite the gully and its shadows. Everything is obvious and amusing, the hard mouth managing a smile, the plumage on its head lifting, the entire creature splendid and imposing in the silvery moonlight. And now the familiar voice, deep and serrated, says:

"You are not particularly tired, I think. Not yet."

Then:

"Phillip. You must have confidence. Confidence in the possibility of success."

Phillip stands, both hands gripping the axe handle. Again he considers the sudden assault, bold and probably suicidal; and perhaps his body, his stance, signal his intentions. Because the Terror places its long bare feet farther apart, telling him:

"Run. You should run."

Phillip cannot move, not in any direction.

And the Terror gives a little chant, throwing its axe into the air, into moonlight, Phillip watching the axe turn and rise and fall and turn again, caught with the same hand, the motions expert and efficient, meant as a warning to him. One of them truly knows how to use their weapon.

Phillip wheels and leaps, out of the gully and turning again, swinging at nothing. Just in case.

The Terror watches, nods and says:

"Now run."

Phillip obeys, tracking sideways like a soccer player, following the crest of the hill and turning forward, his gait strong and the Terror right about his fatigue. He has very little of it. A minute's rest, and he feels ready to run through the night.

RUNNING LOG:
7/4 143 39
Independence Day 5-Mile
22:55
Comments—Quick and strong; fast legs; PR; *Nash*

There have been warnings, looking back.

The collective aches had vanished in the last weeks, including his foot's old miseries. And with comfort came a renewed sense of pop and purpose, Phillip's times dropping steadily through June, in the easy runs as well as the intervals.

The only bitch is that he chose this race to win.

It's a nothing event, purely local. A thousand entered, but no big money to the winner and none of the usual top dogs coming in from around the state. Lining up before the gun, watching his competition do their last surges and stretches, Phillip told himself to win before the halfway mark. Yet the first mile was enough, him streaking along at a 4:30 clip, everyone else feeling the heat and humidity and the brilliant sunshine. He ran the entire race alone, nobody pressing him; and what was strangest was the freshness of his legs and the ease with which he ate the miles. Coming back into the furnacelike downtown, on that last mile, he slowed his pace only because of a panicky sense that he was no longer running inside his own body. It was that easy, and empty.

There was the white ribbon to break, the PA system announcing a new course record. Then someone tore the tag from under his race number; and half a dozen worriers asked Phillip how he felt, if he knew where he was, and could he walk by himself.

A small impressed audience clapped, for a few moments.

Phillip ignored them. He walked past the water tables and the Pepsi van, into the town square with its grass and shade trees. Taking his pulse, he found his heart rate plummeting. Then he drank from a public fountain, taking an inventory of his muscles and joints. No pain at all. Selecting a likely tree, he began to stretch his calves and hamstrings, none of them stiff—

—and Nash said, "Hello, Phillip Krause."

He was beside Phillip, hands behind his back, wearing the same ugly green warm-up and acting as if they were the best of friends.

"My, my. You certainly ran well, don't you think?"

Phillip nearly said, "Fuck off." With anyone else he would have. But instead he shrugged his shoulders and continued the ritual stretching.

Nash moved to where he couldn't be ignored, standing too close while asking, "What do you win for winning?"

"A trophy."

Nash seemed to laugh. "A trophy. My!"

And a gift certificate to the sponsor's store. But he didn't mention that, wondering where in his apartment was there room for another lump of wood and fake brass.

"What an honor," the peculiar man was saying, his tone satirical. He was looking off into the distance, saying, "You're running much better than just a few weeks ago. I wonder why."

That made two of them.

Then Nash said, "I know why. I do."

Once again Phillip decided that the man was foreign, but now, seeing him in daylight, he guessed that he must have been injured in the past, thrown through a windshield and his face rebuilt from the pieces. It had a reasonable shape, ignoring the narrowness, but something about it was inflexible. Dead. It looked like the molded face of the runner on top of every trophy, smooth and hard and unliving.

"You should cool down," Nash assured him.

Phillip always cooled down after hard runs, but here he hesitated.

Laughing, Nash asked, "Are you afraid of me?"

"Come on," Phillip growled. He picked a direction and began to coast, taking them away from the finish line and the abrasive roar of the PA system. His legs were ready for another race, but he held back, finally asking, "So why?"

Nash echoed, "Why?"

"Am I running this fast?" he snapped.

Another pause. The man's teeth were even and white, his tongue coming out to lick at the thin lips; and after wetting them, he smiled and said, "You know very little about everything, don't you?"

What?

"I mean you, and everyone. All of you." Nash tilted his head in an odd fashion, always grinning. "When you think about science, if you ever do, does it occur to you that your finest minds don't comprehend much of this universe? That its properties and possibilities are beyond them? And whatever exists beyond this universe is entirely beyond their reach—"

"What are you saying?" Phillip snarled.

Nash tilted his head in the other direction, the milky skin bright and simple. "Universes without end. Parallel and intersecting in hyperrealms which are close, astonishingly close—"

"What?!"

"With each event, Phillip, every possible occurrence is inevitable. And every potential universe is born."

The man was insane, of course.

"This is just a single unremarkable universe, Phillip—"

"Shut up!"

Nash complied, and he stopped running without warning.

Phillip thought of continuing but couldn't, something in him curious enough to stop and turn, and stare, noticing how the man's flesh looked oily. Not sweating, but almost varnished. "Why am I running fast?" he asked once again, nearly shouting. "You said you know. So tell me. Fucking just tell me."

"Life," said Nash.

Then he said, "Health."

The man is nuts. A crazy. Phillip was relieved to think it, certain that Nash's words would lose their impact. *He's some goofy jerk who forgot to take his medication—*

"Life has its way of degrading health, doesn't it?"

Phillip nodded, thinking of softened brains.

"People acquire parasites," said Nash. "Viruses implant their toxic genes. Chemicals and radiations, natural and not, splinter our good genes, fouling up the most delicate machinery." He stepped closer and touched Phillip on the shoulder, for an instant and so softly that Phillip wondered if he had been touched. Then the long arm dropped and he said, "Imagine." In a low raspy voice, he said, "Imagine you can somehow, someway cleanse yourself, erasing all errors, defeating every disease, and leave yourself clean and pure. At least temporarily."

"Go away," Phillip said, almost without sound.

Again Nash touched the shoulder, squeezing with an astonishing strength, and Phillip kept telling himself to move, to find people, to get away from this maniac—

—and Nash was saying, "Enjoy your victory, Phillip. Absolutely. But your success means very little, I think, and I think it would help if you knew how little it means."

"Go away," Phillip said again, louder.

And the strong hand was withdrawn, the strange man complying, turning without another word and jogging up a side street, looking back just once; and Phillip was thinking, really for the first time:

He isn't human.

Thinking:

Nash isn't.

Telling himself:

Nash is some kind of monster.

He cuts himself while climbing over a fence, a single rusted barb catching the meat of his calf, and Phillip feels it as a heat and a dull pain. It's just a cut, but he can't stop thinking about it, wondering if this little bit of lost blood and torn muscle will weaken him. He finds himself favoring the leg for no good reason, and the imagined weakness grows worse on the next slope, every motion made difficult.

The Terror has fallen back again. Spelling itself, or teasing him. Or maybe bothered by the night's heat and distance, finally.

Coming over another crest, Phillip discovers a long valley and what looks like a road, thin and straight and white; and on his right, to the north, is a block of planted trees, a single strong blue light anchored on a telephone pole.

There's a ranchhouse, he reasons. Down in those trees somewhere.

Phillip sprints, wondering if the Terror is unaware of this oasis. If he can get there without being cut off, he can find help. Hopefully. And the promise heals his leg in an instant, legs driving, a second fence crossed with a deft leap and then he's on the road, simple and graveled, and he hears the distant barks of dogs. Harsh and urgent. And lovely.

Phillip doesn't hesitate. He charges down the road, the dogs coming out to meet him—frantic dark shapes low to the ground—and he shouts, "No, stay! Back!" Rural dogs respect noise and bluster. He threatens them with the axe, never afraid, a threesome of snarling mutts welcome after everything else.

The blue light illuminates a long front yard. An upstairs window is lit, then the windows downstairs. Then the front porch. Phillip is almost to the stairs when a man emerges, dressed in a long bathrobe and holding a shotgun in both hands; and leaping with excitement, like a kid, Phillip cries out:

"Thank God, thank God. . . !"

The rancher responds, his voice scared and quick and mixed with gasping breaths; and very slowly, almost despite himself, Phillip realizes that the man isn't speaking English, or any recognizable language. It's complete gibberish, but with a practiced, structured feel to it.

And now the rancher becomes frustrated, aiming and firing a single round into the air. *Wham*. The dogs leap and retreat. What kind of dogs are they? Like Labs, Phillip notices. Only broader. Stronger. With strange broad heads. And he looks at the rancher again, blinking as he retreats, some angry and stupid part of him wondering:

Why can't you speak English?

But he knows. The explanation has always been with him, and of course this isn't his Earth. Why should it be? And why would a rancher welcome some half-nude, gibberish-spouting runner who carries a vicious axe in one hand? Of course there's no help here, nor anywhere else. What was he thinking? That he was anything except absolutely alone?

The gun is aimed at him now.

Dogs creep nearer, sniffing at his feet and growling.

For an instant, in sudden stark images, Phillip pictures himself charging the rancher and being shot dead. Everything finished. And it's as if all that has happened until now is preparation, readying him for the seminal image of being on his back, bloody and cold. A crow perches on his forehead, pecking at the sightless eyes . . . and he whispers, "No," as he takes one careful step backward. With a calm and quiet and worthy strength, he says, "Like fuck I will. . . ."

The dogs escort him back to the road, into the open again.

Waiting is the Terror, feet kicking gravel backward as it utters some new chant. The wind is rising again. Phillip can barely hear the voice, but he smells the limestone dust and something vaguely animal. And the dogs begin to run toward the Terror, barking and then not, bowing their heads and whimpering as one of the long clawed hands pats each of them in turn, three tails wagging.

Phillip turns, running west again.

"Like fuck I'll die," he tells himself, leaping over another fence and up the next long hill. *No goddamn way.*

Phillip bought his new racing flats with the 5-Miler's gift certificate. When he began running he wore nine-and-a-halves, but mileage has its way of making feet longer and broader. In the store he asked for tens and ten-and-a-halves, putting on the smaller shoes first—peacock colors and feather-light—and he walked around the store, knowing they were too tight with the first step but wishing they'd fit. And just then the store manager came out of the back room, winking and saying:

"Congratulations."

Phillip gave a distracted nod, then a shrug.

The manager asked, "How'd you do it? Blood doping? Bee pollen? What's the trick?"

The manager is a gadfly and a gossip, a pudgy and occasional jogger versed in the language, and he loves to tease Phillip now and again. When brave.

"In that heat, and you still beat your best. And at your age!"

But Phillip didn't feel like boasting for a change. Instead he had a thought, swallowed and asked, "Do you know a runner?" The manager knows everyone. "A new guy? Nash something?"

The manager pinched his face toward his nose, thinking.

"Tall. Pale. Short red hair." *And insane, or worse.*

"Legs up to his neck?"

"You know him?"

"Not really. I mean, he came in here . . . I don't know . . . a couple months back? Something like that?"

Phillip kicked off the shoes, then sat on the hard bench and let the salesgirl lace up the larger pair. "He came here?"

"On a weekday, when it was slow."

"He wears this shit-ugly warm-up—"

"—that he bought somewhere else. I know. He was wearing it then." The manager laughed at the image. "You've run with him?"

"Once. Twice."

"Any good?"

Phillip shrugged and said, "Yeah. I guess."

Two months in the past, but the manager remembered, "All he bought from me was a pair of socks."

Phillip was thinking.

"His name is Nash?"

"You talked to him?"

"For about a week, it seemed like." The manager growled. "He said he'd just moved to town, that he wanted to know about the local running scene. He asked questions."

Phillip stood. The new shoes felt like slippers, like parts of his own feet. "Talk about me?"

Swallowing, the manager looked ridiculously guilty.

"Did Nash ask about me?"

"He may have . . . I don't know. . . ."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Nothing."

"What?" Phillip felt his throat tighten. "Hey! What did you tell him about me?"

The store was silent, customers and clerks watching them. Phillip realized that he was half-shouting, that he was scared and for no clear reason, the lack of reason making it worse, his heart quickening and part of him begging for him to stop asking questions.

But he couldn't stop. He said, "Tell me. Now."

"Hey," the manager warned him, "it's nothing. I don't remember, and forget it. All right?"

On another day it wouldn't have mattered. In other circumstances it would have felt good, knowing that a stranger had heard all the usual bad-mouthing that Phillip had heard third-hand for himself. That he was a prick, a maniac, an incandescent shit. But today he felt a vicelike pressure building, squeezing down on his heart and lungs; and he approached the little prick, ready to grab him and lift him off the ground. To threaten his buttery ass. "Didn't you notice?" he wanted to scream. "Nash is some kind of monster—!"

—but he didn't touch the man, another question occurring to him just then. He breathed, breathed again, then took a step backward. Then he asked, "Have you ever heard about a drink . . . something called STRIDE?"

The manager wiped his palms against his trousers. "Called what?"

Phillip explained, in brief. Then he added, "I'm out. And I was wondering if you're going to carry it."

"Never heard of it. Sorry."

Which he already knew, of course. Phillip was surprised by how little surprise he felt; and the manager watched him, watched his expression, and felt the most astonishing dose of empathy for Phillip.

The craziest shit of a runner, but something in that expression was so very lost. He couldn't help but feel for him.

He rests while in motion, while walking, circling the big galvanized stock pond after drinking his fill, its water cool and clear, pumped from the deep aquifer. Phillip didn't know he was thirsty until he put his mouth to the water, and now his belly is full enough to ache, his thoughts clearing, eyes fixed on the Terror. It's standing in the open, drawing shapes on the ground. A hundred yards between them, and some kind of ritual truce is in effect.

Phillip spits in the pond, then runs west again.

His legs are tight and tired, the right knee aching under the patella and another sore spot up near his left hip flexor. But otherwise, after some twenty-plus miles of hard motion, he is fine. Fine.

After a little while the moon vanishes. To the west-northwest, taller than the Himalayas, is a wall of black clouds. And the southerly wind is roaring, hot and sticky and ceaseless. Phillip can't hear his own feet hitting the ground, much less hear the Terror. He finds himself glancing back every minute or so. Yet he's not frantic either. Not like in the beginning. He has been doing this for what seems like years—being chased; being prey—and a kind of practiced intensity is becoming easier. The elaborate hunt has made him into an expert piece of meat.

Not pressing, he climbs the next long hill, then crosses a fence and turns and sees no one behind him.

And he turns in another few seconds, on a hunch.

The Terror is in motion against the sky, coming over the crest in a strong jog. It moves the axe from hand to hand, pausing at the fence, staring at Phillip and Phillip lifting his axe over his head, like in the beginning. The wind gusts. This is the last southerly wind before the storm front hits. And now he turns, gathering himself as he runs . . . running with measure, with patience . . . the moon gone and the land growing darker by the moment. . . .

"About your scar tissue."

"What scar tissue?"

"Exactly." His physical therapist walked down to his more thoughtful end, showing a puzzled smile. "The scar tissue in your hamstring. I think it's gone."

"It broke up," Phillip offered.

"Something's happened." His therapist is a burly woman with a butcher's hands, strong and warm. For six years Phillip has come to her, surrendering his dignity for the regular massages, her helping to hold him together with a regime of diet and stretching, massages and more stretching. "You've lost weight too, haven't you?"

"Did and gained it back."

"Stand up," she commanded.

"Why?"

"Humor me." Then she grabbed his waist, squeezing a fold of flesh.

"What's wrong?"

She released him and found her calipers, taking measurements from his thigh and waist and chest. "What were you last time?"

"Four percent." Body fat.

Consulting the chart, she said, "Two percent. Provided you're how old? Thirty-five?"

It should have been wondrous news. Next-to-no body fat implies ample muscle mass, nothing extra to carry around the world. But Phillip felt a deep foreboding and an anger, taking a long moment to think about crazy nonsense. Like Nash. Somehow Nash was involved—

—and he asked, "What else can we test?"

She put him on a fancy treadmill, a hose in his mouth and his oxygen consumption measured with clinical care. Then he was run to exhaustion, the treadmill roaring at a six minute per mile pace, then inclined, creating an endless hill that finally, after what felt like a week, left him spent and temporarily sore.

"Not eighty," he heard.

Oxygen over body mass. He couldn't remember the units, but eighty is Olympic caliber.

Then the therapist said, "Seventy-nine. Which might be eighty if we run you again." She gazed at Phillip with a mixture of awe and doubt. "What's that? Six points higher than last time?"

Something like that, yes.

"Are you blood doping?"

No.

"Because something's different," she assured him.

Phillip tried to imagine himself in the Olympics, hanging with the willowy Kenyans, then surging at the end and winning the marathon by plenty; yet the scene felt unreal, almost ludicrous, some instinct firmly assuring him that it would never happen.

"Run more tests," he muttered.

"For what?"

"Drugs."

"Are you taking drugs, Phillip?"

He said nothing.

"Because these are very, very effective drugs. If that's what it is."

"Can you?"

She shook her head, shrugged and said, "We can send your urine to a lab, sure. If you think there's some kind of problem."

There was a problem, but the lab found nothing.

Clean said the report.

Clean, clean, clean.

The wind drops to nothing in front of the storm, the supersaturated air thick enough to drink; and the booming of thunder is constant, distant but stronger every minute. The sky itself has been halfway covered with black clouds, and when Phillip looks back, just as lightning strikes at the earth, he realizes that the Terror isn't quite holding pace anymore.

Instinct says, "Fast," and he obeys, charging through a basin and up the next hill. Legs ache and stiffen, but he keeps them moving. Fifteen years of being chased tells him that the Terror is dropping back, hating this soup more than he hates it, suffering from the humidity after hours of hard motion.

No wind blows across the body; sweat rolls off him, cooling nothing; his flesh feels nearly feverish, cooking itself.

Terrors, he thinks in a lucid moment, *must be nocturnal.*

The thundering leaden air closes in around Phillip, choking him, and he fights the seductive desire to drop and vomit—

The Terror feels worse.

—and not even a backward glance now. Not once. He summons everything for this one final surge across someone else's earth.

RUNNING LOG:
7/24 144 32
Two mile warm-up, stretching
Comments—Nash Nash Nash Nash NASH NASH NASH NASH *NASH NASH*

The track was crowded that evening, maybe two dozen joggers and serious plodders working hard, and Phillip was stretching, down on the grass and one leg out in front of him, nose to his knee with minimal effort. The white Mercedes appeared in the distance, turning off the boulevard and then into the student lot, parking exactly where it had parked last time and the driver's door opening and Phillip watching Nash, part of him icy calm and part of him anything but. But he refused to act scared. The asshole was only crazy, he had told himself for weeks. And he could handle crazy. Putting his cheek to his knee, he held the stretch for as long as it took Nash to walk to him. Wearing the green warm-up, naturally. And grinning. Then kneeling beside him, the fabric crackling and one of his knees giving a faint dry *pop*.

"Hello, Phillip."

Phillip said nothing, sitting up and taking a full deep breath. A picture of calm, yet his heart was beginning to ram against his ribs.

"Speed work, Phillip?"

So talk, he thought. And he said, "Mile repeats."

"A poor plan," the crazy man responded.

Ignore him. Phillip changed legs and dropped and held the new stretch, his face turned the other direction, looking west across the clipped and summer-browned grass of the practice field.

"You should rest now," he heard. "Relax."

Phillip asked, "Why?"

"Because," said the voice behind him. "In a few days, I think, you'll need your energy. Very soon."

Phillip sat up, breathed and looked at Nash.

Nash wasn't smiling, but there was something serene and infinitely pleased in his expression, the pale skin of his flesh reflecting the ruddy sunlight, the eyes never larger.

"Go away," Phillip whispered, his voice breaking.

"Perhaps you could spend these days putting your affairs in order." The arrogance showed again, never far beneath the words and gestures. "I think it's fair to give you that chance."

Go away.

Nash leaned closer, one hand patting Phillip on the knee. "In your Arctic," he began, "wolves run the caribou for miles—"

What?

"—even though they can catch them sooner. They run them, and do you know why?"

Not breathing, Phillip waited. His mind was blank.

And the crazy man said nothing, reaching into his own mouth with a motion practiced and efficient, fingers gripping something and giving a strong jerk—gripping his tongue—and the tongue slipped free with a smooth wet squish, twisting and rolling as it lay in his upturned palm.

A new tongue emerged from between the large white teeth, thinner and long, gut-red and shiny.

The voice was distorted but recognizable.

"They chase," said Nash, "and because? Because it sweetens the meat."

Sweetens the meat.

But what truly scared Phillip—what terrified him enough to make him shiver and moan—wasn't the words and it wasn't the monster's tongue. It was him looking across the track, watching the various runners and even knowing a few of their names . . . and him realizing with a chilling honesty that nobody here cared about him. Not enough to believe him, much less help him.

He was alone.

Watching Nash walk away. Understanding that anything could happen to him. Anything. And he would never be missed.

Lightning strikes nearby, a scalding white blast of electricity followed by the immediate crash, and he presses toward the hill's crest, wishing that the next bolt will hit behind him, frying the Terror. It's possible. Unlikely but undeniably possible, which means that in a multitude of universes it does happen—

—and he glances backward once from the crest, for an instant, discovering a lead, authentic and intoxicating. The Terror is a tiny shape almost lost against the grass, maybe three hundred yards between them. Flashes of more distant lightning show the creature in strobe-fashion, once and then again. It's laboring, if only a little bit. Bent forward and distracted by its own fatigue.

At least Phillip believes that it's tired, bolstering his own confidence, over the sharp crest and stopping again, then kneeling, facing east and working to count the seconds, guessing pace and distance and waiting, gathering himself.

The first fat cold drops of rain fall on his back.

Another blast of lightning illuminates every head of grass, every raindrop; then comes a sudden cold wind, swirling and throwing more rain. Over his shoulder he sees the storm rushing across the valley, black and fast, and roaring, and Phillip hearing nothing but a faint gray whisper, eyes dropping, hands strangling the little axe.

After Nash drove away, after the aborted intervals, Phillip went home and changed into his uniform and went to work, struggling for normalcy. Then he came home and lay in bed, never sleeping, listening to the hum of his refrigerator and thuds through the apartment walls and a car backfiring two blocks away. By noon he was up again, sitting on his sofa, trying to think of anyone he could visit in the middle of the day, or call. Who would believe him and offer to help him? It was a horrible puzzle, no good answer waiting at the end. What was better, he learned, was to pretend that Nash was just a liar using tricks to tease him. To torture him. To make him look like a madman to the world.

Phillip drifted into sleep for a few hours, then awoke in the evening. Again he dressed in the rumpled brown uniform, and he left home with seventy-two dollars in his wallet, driving toward work after nightfall, watching the traffic in the mirrors and no trace of a Mercedes shadowing him. He barely warned himself what he was planning, driving past the factory, out onto the Interstate, then east, skirting the empty unlit hill country and pushing the old Datsun to better than seventy, hands clinging to the steering wheel and his eyes on the mirrors more than they looked ahead.

Nobody was following him. By dawn he was into his third state, feeling relief and even a tentative joy. He celebrated with breakfast at a truck stop—a substantial greasy egg-and-sausage breakfast—and wondered where he should stop driving. How far was far enough? And he would need a place to live, plus a job. How did a person acquire a new life?

This is best, he kept telling himself.

Now running was impossible, under any name. He imagined that Nash would be searching for an athlete matching his description, and Phillip was desperate enough to accept the loss of that linchpin. Looking at the truckers and salesmen and vacationers and waitresses, examining their tired, self-involved faces, he tried to fashion some imaginary life for himself. True friends; a wife; fat pink kids. It was the kind of normalcy that he'd always seen as a trap, suffocating and final; yet nothing could feel as precious or remarkable now, Phillip assuring himself that he'd never run another step, making himself fat and slow, and old, no monster ever again taking any interest in him.

He paid and left, the urgency gone. Driving again, it occurred to Phillip that this was nothing new. Once before he had transformed his life, making himself over again, and he would do it better this time.

At the next rest area he pulled off and parked. The men's room was empty, and he took the back stall, hearing the men's room door open and close and someone cough, then the rattle of a zipper. Eventually a urinal was flushed, and the door opened, and someone else entered as the first man left. Phillip heard a squeak of shoes. Then he rose and flushed, fastening the brown trousers. And he stepped out and around the stalls, Nash standing with his back to one of the urinals, squatting, the warm-up's trousers around his ankles and the face smiling, arrogance mixed with amusement as he said:

"These aren't designed for me."

Phillip felt almost no surprise. In that instant, in many ways, he found himself distancing himself from shock and fear and every other strong emotion. Of course he had been followed. Of course this creature could track him at will, no escape possible. Any other thought was ridiculous, even foolish. To have come as far as this thing had come—

—and he thought of a question, swallowing before he asked, "What are you? Really?"

A laugh came, almost musical. Nash said, "The best translation? A Terror. That's what we call ourselves."

Phillip stared at the penisless crotch and the bizarre birdlike architecture of the hips and legs. The trousers must somehow hide the differences, he realized; and he muttered:

"A Terror?"

"And my name is not Nash, I'm afraid." The Terror pulled up the trousers, then turned and began to wash its hands in the sink, hot water and strong soap swirling together. "My true name is Naa*A*T*a*t."

Phillip looked into the urinal. Something white and semi-solid, like bird shit, was floating on the yellow water.

"Where are you from?" Phillip managed to ask.

"Didn't I tell you?" Another laugh. "From another Earth, Phillip. A separate and distinct alternate possibility."

He thought of running, but his legs refused to move. And he imagined striking the Terror, using his fists. But the creature seemed too relaxed and confident, and too large. *Wait,* he cautioned himself. *Wait.*

It dried its hands against its shirt, then said, "Here. Look." And it opened the shirt in front, proudly showing its pale muscular chest. There were no nipples, and every line was wrong, the rib cage too narrow and the arms set wrong into the wide shoulders. It wasn't a bird's chest, nor anything else that Phillip could name. He barely heard the squeak of the door, the Terror closing the shirt as a beefy fellow came around the corner, finding the men facing one another, the scene odd. Probably obscene. The man cursed in low tones, shuffling into one of the stalls; and the Terror said:

"Come with me."

Phillip followed. Again he thought of running and didn't. And fighting but wouldn't. He was trapped. Stepping into the brilliant horizontal sunshine, he squinted and gave a long discouraged sigh. Parked beside his Datsun was the Mercedes, white as bone. The Terror opened the passenger's door for him, and he sat on the smooth warm leather seat, swinging his legs inside, the door slammed shut and locking itself. *Wait. Pick your moment.* The interior was gloomy with the smoked glass windows, the world outside left in perpetual twilight. The Terror walked around the front and climbed in and shut its door, grinning now, hands on the wheel, telling Phillip with a happy voice:

"Anything is possible."

Phillip sighed again.

"Everything is possible," he heard, "and everything happens in an endless array of living universes."

"I don't understand," he whispered.

They were driving east again, no need to hurry now. Traffic passed them until they came to the next interchange, and the Terror—a careful, even overly cautious driver—signaled and took them off and over the viaduct, then back onto the Interstate again, driving west.

Phillip's stomach hurt. He placed a hand on it, kneading the muscles.

"Within my universe, on my Earth," said the Terror, "there was a line of protobirds who never gained flight. Who never lost their hands. Whose wrists never fused, and who moved into the trees to live like lemurs and monkeys. Who survived every mass extinction for a hundred million years, eventually thriving."

Phillip worked to not listen.

"Everything is possible. And each universe is a structure built from countless unlikely events."

He took a breath and held it, his chest aching.

The Terror looked at him, saying, "Drink something. I brought several bottles. You'll want to be hydrated and fed for this."

On the back seat was a gym bag. Inside it were three water bottles filled with strong mixtures of STRIDE, plus his peacock-colored racing flats and his black shorts and a new pair of polypropylene socks, a tag dangling from the toes. Holding up one shoe, Phillip said, "You were in my apartment?"

"I took liberties," the Terror confessed. "I thought you would appreciate your own shoes."

Philip managed a few mouthfuls of the sweet-bitter liquid, remembering the taste and feeling a tingle beneath his skin.

Then Naa*AT*at was telling him, "My Earth is especially strange. You see, it gave rise to two intelligent tool-using species simultaneously. Both upright. One omnivorous, the other more predatory. Each with its own hemisphere. But then the seas dropped during an ice age, and each followed the wandering herds onto the other's lands."

Phillip breathed and asked, "Why tell me?"

"Aren't you even a little curious?" The Terror laughed and said, "I am very disappointed, Phillip."

"Fuck you," he whispered.

"This other species was mammalian. Primate-derived. In appearance and history and habits, it was human." Again the Terror opened its shirt, exposing the chest. One hand on the steering wheel, it pulled a small cylinder from a leather pocket on the door, air hissing as the tool applied paint to its flesh, an artful spearhead drawn on the sternum. "We competed," it explained. "For thousands of years, in every sense of the word, we competed for dominion over our earth. Terrors and the Others. A vast sad brutal lovely holy struggle, and, of course, we worshipped one another. We carved idols with our enemy's face, and we stole each other's gods, and no honor was so great as the honor won in a fair fight. A Terror and an equal Other would chase one another to the death, everyone's gods cheering for the victor."

Phillip sat back and shut his eyes.

"Pressed by the Others, we evolved faster than we might have evolved otherwise. Otherwise? Isn't that a pun?"

He opened his eyes. The monster was peeling some kind of tape from its back, freeing a short thin tail that had been pulled flush against its spine.

"We entered our industrial age many thousands of years ago. And I'm sorry to confess, Phillip, that one of our first acts was to make our great enemy vanish. Extinct. In a century or two we owned the entire Earth, yet part of us died with them. A vital part, I think."

Phillip looked at the door handle, trying to will himself to open it. *Fall out and roll. Crippled, I won't be worth anything.*

"Eventually we learned about the hyperrealm and the infinite universes, Earths populated with every assemblage of life, and we have excelled. In part we have excelled because we know how to deal with strange species. We have experience, of course. Which is our special luck."

Phillip said nothing.

"Imagine our astonishment and joy, Phillip. On a portion of Earths, like yours, humans have evolved without us. Safe from us. How would you feel if an essential part of your heritage were to reappear after death? What would you do?"

"Will you destroy us?" he whispered.

"Hardly. Dear Phillip, we are civilized creatures. We make friends. We trade. We take nothing but the best. The excess. Following the ancient faiths, with a multitude of Earths in our reach, we can afford to be selective."

Phillip took a breath and held it.

The Terror had stopped painting its chest, putting down the stick and shoving two fingers into some hidden seam on the other wrist, peeling that hand free as you would a tight-fitting glove. The hand within was clawed and long and reminiscent of a chicken's foot, bony and scaled. Then that hand reached below, removing one green shoe to expose a long three-toed foot, claws painted red. Then the first hand pierced a seam on the neck, removing the face and shoulders with a hard jerk. Everything changed in an instant. Except for its eyes, Phillip noticed. And he gasped, moaning to himself, pressing against the door and jerking on the handle, the lock refusing to release.

There were bright red feathers and a bony abbreviated beak, the human teeth removed and curved white knives in their place, the beak able to move enough to feign a smile, and a changed voice telling him:

"You can win, I promise you. There is no glory in the unlosable contest."

Phillip stared at the creature, trying to gather himself.

"Not that you will have a great chance of winning, either." The laugh was huge and shrill, almost birdlike. "I'm not an idiot, after all."

Phillip reached with both hands, trying for the steering wheel, then he felt the impact of a needle plunging into his back, up through the upholstery, a cocktail of drugs making him fall asleep in moments.

"That's good," he heard. "Rest will help you, I should think."

Then he was awake again, finding himself running hard and alone across an empty, windswept prairie.

Never the sprinter, he digs and drives, adrenaline and nerves helping and his arms pumping, coming back over the crest again, charging the Terror that he imagines must be on the other side . . . and wrong, by a few feet, leaping at the last instant and lightning exploding behind him and the weary shocked big-eyed Terror on his left, not his right, Phillip having to twist and swing the axe while off-balance, without ample force.

The other axe is lifted, metal striking metal, thunder masking the sound and rainwater washing over them in a wave. Phillip lands and nearly falls, twisting again, a blind quick slash at the closer arm while the Terror's axe is down—

Another fierce blast of lightning.

—and meat cut, then bone, a forearm left ruined and bloody and his opponent's scream loud as the thunder.

Another slash, nothing struck.

Then he retreats and thinks again and charges.

And the Terror changes hands, blocking the next blow with its axe, wood against wood and the blades catching and the Terror managing to focus and drive and twist, screaming again, Phillip's axe pulled from his fingers and thrown off into the swirling grass.

Phillip retreats again, trying to follow the axe's flight.

Then the Terror descends on him, protecting its bad arm and swinging, and swinging, then shouting in its own language, invoking gods, swinging a third time and Phillip dropping back, then stumbling and falling and down on his side, momentarily stunned.

The Terror charges, and he rolls.

Stands.

The axe strikes on Phillip's shoulder but the blade missing high, a bruise and crunch and he's charging, screaming for himself, getting beneath the Terror and swinging with his fists, then twisting and driving an elbow into the ribs and falling backward, the Terror beneath him and its good arm taking aim.

Phillip grabs it by the wrist, the Terror muscling the blade down to within inches of his face. He sees the flash of lightning in the polished metal. He can't resist the pressure. Still on top of the Terror, he feels as if he is being embraced to death, breathing in gulps and screaming, "Fuck you!" and then, "You won't!" and lifting his head, twisting his neck, finding a fat long chicken finger in his mouth and clamping down hard enough to taste blood, then tendons, the teeth cutting into a white rubbery joint—

—and the Terror wails and flings the axe to one side, freeing itself. Phillip is up and turning. Lightning strikes a nearby hillside, the world lit up for miles, and something short lies in the grass, him bending fast and gripping a handle, knowing the feel of it and turning—

—and the Terror fumbling for its axe—

—and Phillip charging it and swinging, catching the lowered head with the wood and blade, the head giving a good solid *pop* as it snaps back, the body collapsing in an instant.

Then he stands over the monster, not thinking.

And again it reaches for its axe, Phillip screaming, "No!" and striking the nearest leg as if it's firewood, severing the hamstring, a deep thorough wound crippling the Terror and it screaming, grabbing what's ruined.

Phillip throws its axe as far as he can.

And he turns back, believing he is ready. He stands over the monster with his axe in both hands, and it grows silent and still, having the discipline or the fear to deny the white pain.

Phillip remembers.

With rain falling, with the Terror sprawled out in a bowl of matted grass, he remembers the crow and its butchered ground squirrel; and then the monster shouts:

"Please, please take my head!"

What?

"Set it! My head! In a place of honor!"

As a trophy? Is that what it wants?

"Promise me," the creature begs.

And Phillip thinks of that long-dead ground squirrel, feeling an aching genuine pity—

—no, not for the squirrel.

"Please," Naa*AT*at whimpers.

Phillip leans close, asking, "How do I get home?"

"My car. Is where we began." A wince of pain. "It will take you."

"Will it?"

"With my head? Promise me?"

Phillip doesn't answer, contemplating everything. Whatever happens, he knows, his life is remade. It's reconstituted around what he chooses to do now—

"I beg you, please!"

—and he decides, lifting his axe and cutting with the long serrated blade, slicing free a handful of the brilliant red feathers, saying, "Sorry," over the sound of the wind-driven rain. "You just picked the wrong animal, I guess."

The Terror screams once again, in horror.

Then Phillip begins to run, leaving it, moving east with a gentle gait, feathers in one hand and the axe in the other.

Sometimes he stops, tipping his head back to drink rainwater.

How many miles so far?

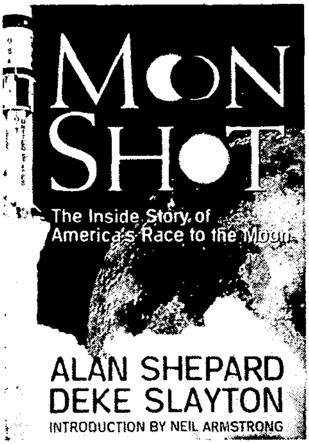
He doesn't even guess, running with a pace that he can hold forever, laughing and then crying and then laughing again, hills to the horizon and him floating over each of them in turn. ●

when the voices

began,
she looked around
but could not find
their source;
spoke to her,
she tried to ignore them,
at first—no one
ever spoke to her;
continued,
she of necessity accepted them
and even began to talk back,
having come in time to trust them;
said they loved her,
she embraced them in her mind
and was happy
for a first time in her life;
left,
she wept
while other voices told her
she was cured.

—W. Gregory Stewart

Tesla
by Tad Wise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ALAN SHEPARD
DEKE SLAYTON
INTRODUCTION BY NEIL ARMSTRONG

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ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD WINNER [AND OTHER VERY IMPORTANT PEOPLE]

by Sheila Williams

Eric Choi, a twenty-one-year-old aerospace engineering student at the University of Toronto, became the first person to win the Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing this past winter. In March, the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, which co-sponsored the award with *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, flew Eric to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, for an all-expense-paid weekend at the annual Conference on the Fantastic. The trip was a welcome respite from the icy north, where the thirteenth snowstorm of the season battered the region.

The winner, runners-up, and honorable mentions were chosen by Gardner Dozois, myself, and IAFA award administrator Rick Wilber. Rick is a science fiction writer and a journalism professor at the University of South Florida. On Thursday, March 17, I escaped a frozen New York City and joined him at the conference in sunny Florida. At the Saturday evening banquet, I presented Eric with the award certificate and a check for $500 from *Asimov's Science Fiction*. This gave me the opportunity to surprise Eric with the news that we had accepted his award-winning story, "Dedication," for publication in the magazine.

In addition to these laurels, Eric was named the winner of the Baird Searles Award for younger writers. This special one-time award was named for our distinguished reviewer who died in 1993. Eric received a second check for $500 from the family, friends, and colleagues of Mr. Searles.

As judges, we had originally planned on only one Asimov Award winner. Once we discovered the high quality of many of the submissions to the contest, we decided to expand the winners' circle. Felicity Savage, a freshman at Columbia University in New York City, entered a number of excellent tales. As first runner-up for her fantasy, "Roses in the Blood," she received a T-shirt and a two-year subscription to *Asimov's*. Our finalists were Micole Sudberg, a junior at Yale University, for her short story, "Calliope," and Monica Eiland, a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for her short story, "Saving Grace." Each was awarded a one-year subscription to *Asimov's* and a T-shirt.

Receiving honorable mentions were Marsheila Rockwell of Montana State University for "Auf Widershins," Chris Gattanella of the University of Georgia for "Knaragua's Rage," Timalyne Lindquist-Frazier of Marlboro

College for "Burning in the Montage," Cory Doctorow of the University of Waterloo for "The Adventures of Ma 'n' Pa Frigidaire," and Kerry Jamieson of the University of Tampa for "Unicorns in America."All of our honorable mentions received *Asimov's* T-shirts. We were lucky to have Chris Gattanella and Kerry Jamieson in attendance at the conference.

While they lounged around the swimming pool, our three delightful finalists were able to meet such science fiction luminaries as Brian Aldiss, Joe Haldeman, Terry Bisson, and Jack Dann, and newer writers like Kathleen Ann Goonan and Nicola Griffith.

The Isaac Asimov Award was created to honor the memory of Dr. Asimov. Like our contestants, he began writing science fiction at an early age, and like our winner, he was a college student when his first short story saw publication. I know that the Good Doctor would have enjoyed "Dedication." It is written in the hard science fiction tradition, and Eric tells us that authors like Isaac Asimov and Robert A. Heinlein first introduced him to science and science fiction. I'm sure Isaac would have been pleased to meet Eric, and would have wished him luck in his dual careers.

With the publication of "Dedication" we conclude the festivities surrounding the first annual Asimov Award and turn our attention to the second. This year's deadline for submissions to the contest is November 15, 1994. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. We were pleased with last year's international turnout—not only did we receive stories from the U.S. and Canada, but tales also came in from Mexico and Europe. Remember, though, that all submissions must be in English.

Stories should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submissions can be returned and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university.

Submissions and contest guidelines requests should be sent to:

Asimov Award
USF 3177
4202 E. Fowler
Tampa, FL 33620-3177

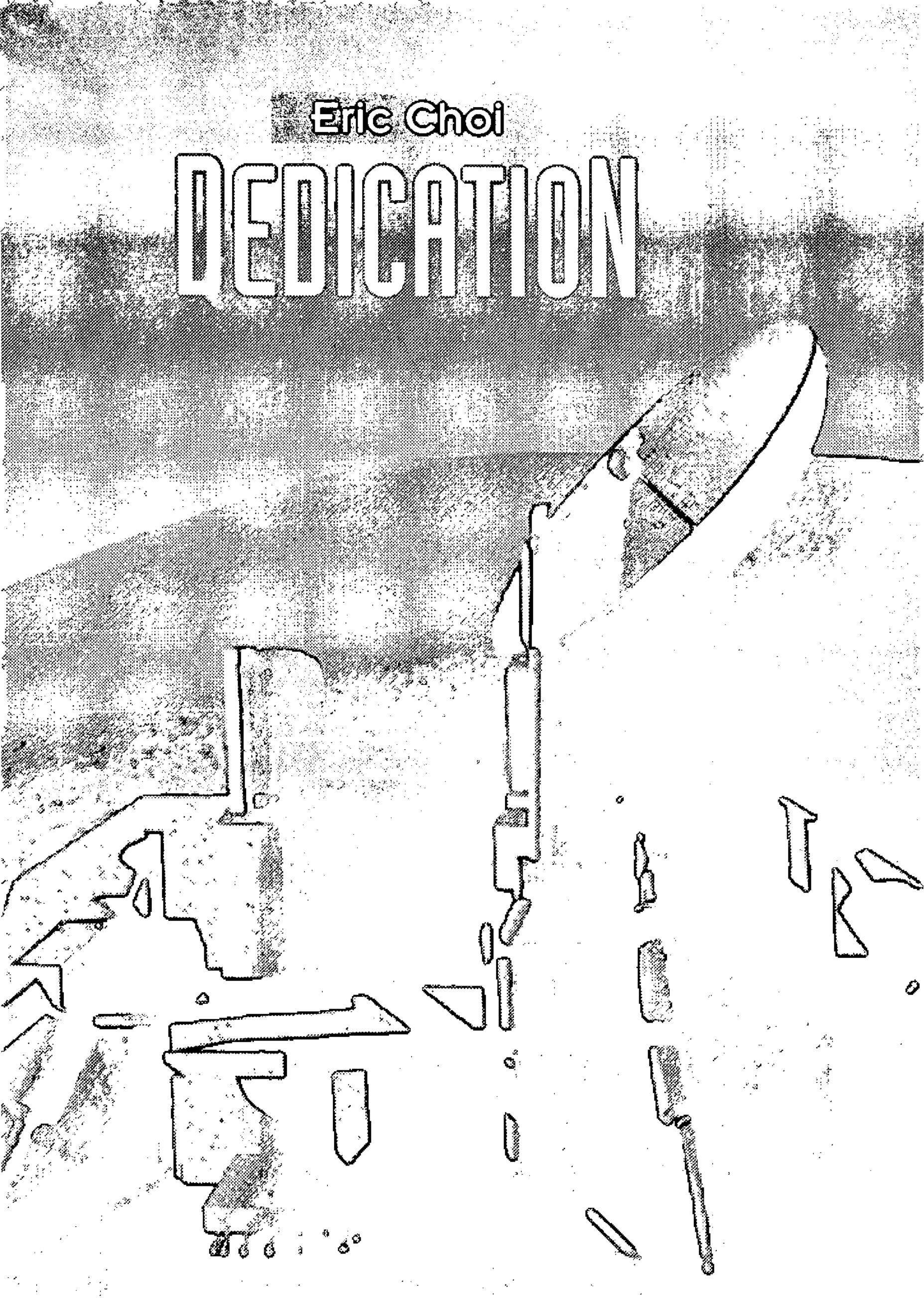
For more information, contact:

Rick Wilber
School of Mass Communications
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL 33620

Once again, we'd like to see a wide range of stories. We're looking for fantasy as well as all forms of science fiction. We know we'll be seeing an exciting new group of tales, and we wish all of our contestants the best of luck. Next year's winner will be announced at the 1995 Conference on the Fantastic and in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine.

Eric Choi

DEDICATION



The winner of our first Asimov Award is an aerospace engineering major at the University of Toronto and a member of the Planetary Society. Three years ago, he took first place in the group's Mars Institute Contest, and was given an opportunity to meet some of the scientists and engineers who worked on the Mariner and Viking missions to the Red Planet. He tells us "'Dedication' was written as a salute to these pioneering men and women." The story is also his first professional sale.

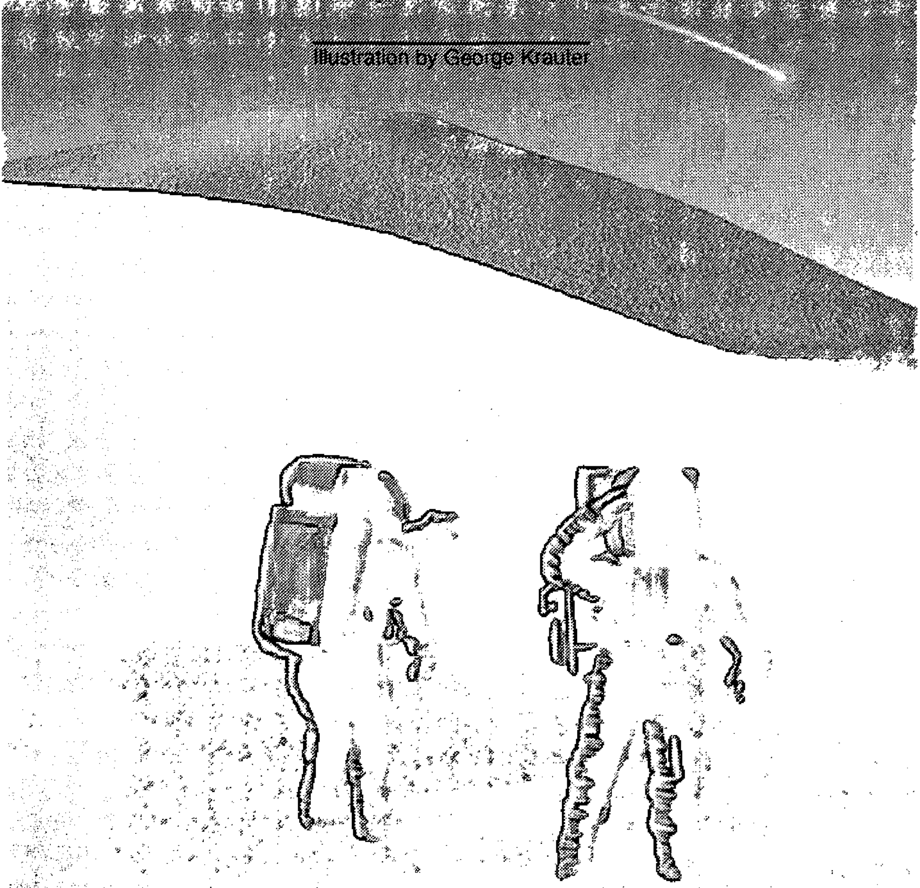


Illustration by George Krauter

There is no gold on the Plains of Gold.

The region is more commonly known by its Latin name, Chryse Planitia. Not a trace of gold was in evidence. The predominant color, as it was everywhere on Mars, was red. Red in every shade, complexion, and hue imaginable.

Sharp, angular pieces of rusty limonite were scattered about. The rocks ranged in size from a few centimeters to a two-meter monster nicknamed Big Joe. The entire vista was blanketed overhead by a deceptively warm-looking sky of salmon pink.

None of this mattered to Oleg Solovyov; he was not here to gawk at the scenery. As the engineering specialist for the Ares 4 mission, the examination of the human relic before him was his unique responsibility. Sightseeing could, and would, have to wait.

Had Solovyov a bit of imagination, he might have described the jeep-sized craft as bearing a strange resemblance to a robotic camel. A parabolic dish antenna atop a narrow boom could be thought of as the creature's head and neck. For humps, two cylindrical silos housing the cameras sprouted from its top, and in lieu of a tail the machine possessed a stubby mechanical arm for taking soil samples.

But a most unusual looking camel, at that. The "head" was stuck in the middle of and behind the "humps," while the "tail" jutted out haphazardly in front. Besides, the craft only had three legs.

Through his spacesuit radio, he could hear an enthusiastic monologue delivered by Dr. Michèle Lafrenière, the Ares 4 science specialist. She had been taking samples from the regolith—the surface layer of dust and rock—at a site ninety meters behind Solovyov, but she was now in the process of recording a video of her work for later TV and vidnet distribution on Earth. She went on to talk about the subsurface permafrost layer that she had also taken a core sample of, and her hopes that the presence of water meant that Mars once held or still harbored some form of life.

Solovyov shook his head. Lafrenière had been an adjunct professor of planetary science at the International Space University in Strasbourg before being accepted into Project Ares. He completely failed to understand how a person of her intelligence could actually enjoy wasting time on such meaningless activities. He, at least, had other things to worry about.

Things like the metal pipe he was trying to cut off that refused to give. For the past five minutes, he had been trying to get a sample of one of the old spacecraft's nitrogen lines without success. Cutting metal in the Martian environment was a stranger experience than Solovyov had expected. The biggest difference from doing so on Earth was the absence of any sound or sparks from the friction of his blade, robbing him of the familiar audio and visual cues.

Lafrenière in the meantime had completed her narration, and Solovyov's helmet speakers fell silent. That meant he was next. He grunted, and pressed the tool harder against the metal. Slowly he could feel the circular blade working its way until with a sudden jerk the cutter went through, and the metal sample snapped off easily into Solovyov's grip.

"Done?" asked a new voice on the radio.

Solovyov turned around and presently another spacesuited figure came into view. Shaun Christopher, the mission commander, stood before him holding a small black camera in his right hand. Having finished recording Lafrenière's presentation he was now, Solovyov knew, about to pester him.

"*Da*," Solovyov replied curtly. He gestured to the camera. "Is that truly necessary?"

Christopher hefted the device in his hand. "Well, Michèle just completed a short talk on her work, and Doc gave a little tour of the rover earlier, so I guess it's your turn, Ollie."

Solovyov winced. He despised that anglicized nickname Christopher had bestowed upon him, but kept his mouth shut in the interest of crew harmony.

"Commander Christopher—"

"Shaun."

"—There is so much work to be done. Perhaps the time could be better spent . . ."

"Look, Ollie, this doesn't take any time at all, and it's important." Christopher sighed audibly. "I don't get it. Why are you always like this?"

"I do not believe it is important." Solovyov said stubbornly.

Christopher spread out his arms in a pleading gesture. "Well, it is. You know. 'No bucks, no Buck Rogers.' " He paused. "Buck Rogers?"

"*Kto?*"

"Just talk about the lander, talk about your work, okay? Please? Everyone else's done their song and dance. It'll look strange if you're left out."

"Very well. But briefly." Solovyov gritted his teeth.

"Thank you." Christopher raised the camera until its eyepiece was against the tinted faceplate of his helmet. His left hand made a few adjustments to the lens before he started recording. "Here's Oleg Solovyov, our engineering specialist. What is this old relic, and what kind of work have you been doing with it?"

"The old spacecraft you see before you is the Viking 1 Lander." Solovyov took a step out of the way and gestured at it with his right hand.

"It was launched in the last century, and was the first spacecraft to successfully soft-land on Mars.

"The Viking is of great engineering importance. From it we can learn about the long-term effects of the Martian environment on materials and machines. I have collected some parts of the craft for analysis on Earth." Specifically, he had taken a piece of tubing, a length of cable, the collector head from the Viking's sampler arm, and one of the lander's two cameras. "This information will be vital if we build a permanent base on Mars."

"I did a video survey of the Viking before you started taking samples, to get a record of its original condition." Christopher said. "Besides its reddish tint, the lander shows remarkably few signs of wear."

"Yes, physically the Viking is in exceptional condition. Except for the dust." He turned from the camera momentarily to look at the lander. Its entire metal frame was coated with a fine rustlike layer, and each of its three legs was embraced by a fillet of the material. Such was its mute testimony to the raging dust storms that often engulfed the planet, darkening the sky and sending temperatures plummeting. The study of this fearsome phenomenon by Viking and other spacecraft had led terrestrial scientists to the theory of nuclear winter.

"Okay, that's fine," Christopher said as he lowered the camera. Solovyov let out a long breath. "You know, you really did very well."

Solovyov brightened at the unexpected compliment. "*Spasibo.*"

"Now, was that so bad?" the commander added.

Solovyov did not reply.

A moment later, the two astronauts were joined by a third. Having completed her geological sample collection tasks, Michèle Lafrenière approached her colleagues. Her right hand held a wire-frame mesh bag full of sample containers, while her left held the long corer device and various other tools.

Solovyov looked up as she neared, and Christopher followed his gaze. "I know *you're* done."

"Of course."

"All right, then. I guess it's time." The commander took a few steps up to Solovyov and handed him the camera. "Will you do the honors?"

He took the device from Christopher.

The scientific and engineering objectives of the EVA had been completed. But there was one more, very special task to perform.

Christopher walked toward the northwestern face of the Viking—the side opposite from the robotic arm where Solovyov had been working. With Lafrenière at his side, the Russian followed their commander around the old spacecraft.

"How's your foot?" she asked.

Solovyov looked down at his right foot. He had tripped on a rock and fallen earlier in the afternoon, and the leg of his spacesuit still bore a ruddy stain from the mishap. "It is a little sore, but it is nothing."

"Clumsy," Lafrenière chided playfully.

Christopher positioned himself in front of the Viking. From the bottom of the camera, Solovyov released the tripod and extended the legs. Even though the camera was small and light, the appendages looked impossibly too thin to hold up its weight. Each of the three silvery telescoping segments resembled a segment of the rabbit-ear antennae of early TV sets. But Martian gravity was only two-fifths that of Earth, so the flimsy looking stand was more than adequate for the job.

Solovyov set the camera on the ground, made sure it was level, then looked into the eyepiece. He saw a flashing yellow light. "There is not much more room on this disk," he reported.

"How much?" Christopher asked.

"Sixteen minutes," Solovyov replied.

"Aw, that's fine. Plenty." Christopher stomped his feet and adjusted his position, then said, "Okay. Whenever you're ready."

Solovyov pressed some buttons on a keypad on top of the camera, adjusted the lens, looked into the eyepiece, and gestured for Christopher to start.

"This is Commander Christopher, speaking to you again from the surface of Mars. We're just about finished our work here at the western slope of Chryse Planitia, but before we leave, there's one more thing we have to do.

"You know, the reason I'm able to speak to you from Mars today is because of all the hard work people around the world put into making our voyage here possible. Not just the work done in the last decade or so with the Ares program, but the efforts of visionary men and women stretching all the way back to the last century.

"Today, I'd like to take this time to honor just one of those individuals. His name was Thomas Mutch. He was a scientist—a member of the team that sent this probe, the Viking 1 Lander," he gestured at the spacecraft, "here in 1976. Dr. Mutch saw planetary exploration as a grand adventure of the human spirit, and it was always his dream that one day people would walk the surface of Mars, maybe even . . ." Christopher reached out and laid a hand on the lander. ". . . Maybe even pay his beloved Viking a visit.

"When he died in 1981, the Viking 1 Lander was renamed the Thomas A. Mutch Memorial Station in his honor." At this point, Christopher paused his monologue and unzipped a pouch on his left thigh. From the pouch, he produced a small, stainless steel object. "This plaque," he held it up to the camera, "was made then, in the hope that one day someone would bring it to Mars and attach it to the spacecraft. Well, it's taken almost forty years for the people of Earth to muster the will and the resources, but today it is the honor—and the privilege—of the Ares 4 crew to fulfill that dream."

With infinite care, Commander Shaun Christopher bolted the Mutch Station Plaque to the Viking 1 Lander.

When the task was completed, the commander took a few steps back and read the inscription aloud:

> DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF TIM MUTCH, WHOSE IMAGINATION, VERVE, AND RESOLVE CONTRIBUTED GREATLY TO THE EXPLORATION OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM.

Finally, he took a deep breath and said, "I hereby dedicate the Thomas A. Mutch Memorial Station." With those words he brought himself smartly to attention, and saluted.

Beside Solovyov, Lafrenière put down her gear and saluted the monument as well—a gesture of unmitigated sentimentalism that the engineer wanted no part of.

By the time Solovyov returned to the rover with Christopher and Lafrenière, he was tired and sweaty. It was the same with every EVA. At first, he would look forward to the excursion as a chance to escape the cramped confines of the vehicle, but by the day's end he was always—well, tired and sweaty.

Solovyov vacuumed off the red dust that covered his spacesuit before stowing the suit, then waited for his turn at the personal hygiene facility. His mood began to improve after he had a chance to freshen up with moist towels and change into a standard powder-blue in-vehicle jumpsuit. Once he'd cleaned up, he went to the flight physician for an examination of his foot.

Dr. Wong Xuesen was the final member of what the media dubbed the Ares 4-some. He was a short, stocky man in his late thirties. He had bulging brown eyes and a straight-banged crop of black hair that—according to Christopher—gave him more than a passing resemblance to the Moe character in old *Three Stooges* programs. Solovyov had no idea what the commander was talking about.

"I think you strained a muscle," the physician said. He still spoke with a slight British accent, a remnant of his undergraduate days at Edinburgh University. The two men sat beside one another on a narrow bench in the rover's laboratory compartment, just behind the cab. Solovyov had rolled up his right pant leg and taken off his sock, while Dr. Wong gingerly examined his foot.

"Think?"

"You strained a muscle," Dr. Wong repeated as he opened his kit. He produced a vial and removed two pills from it. "Take these, and let me know if it still hurts tomorrow."

Solovyov took the pills and fingered them doubtfully. "It's just ASA," Dr. Wong replied to the unspoken question.

Christopher was leaning against a bulkhead with his arms crossed, watching the exchange. The forty-nine-year-old veteran astronaut was still as muscular and fit as a man a decade younger. Only the grey streaks in his once all-brown hair betrayed his age. Upon hearing Dr. Wong's prescription, he laughed. "Take two aspirin and call me in the morning! Some things never change. Any other recommendations, Doc?"

"Well," Dr. Wong began as he closed his kit, "I suppose he ought to go easy on that foot for a while. Give it a rest."

"Ah." Christopher raised an eyebrow and smiled deviously, as if he had heard exactly what he wanted to hear. "You know, Doc, of the four of us you're the only one who's never actually piloted the rover—outside of the simulator of course."

Although driving the rover was primarily the responsibility of Christopher and Solovyov, both Lafrenière and Wong had been trained in its operation in case of an emergency. Lafrenière had piloted the vehicle for several hours during their journey to the Viking site, but as Christopher had noted, Dr. Wong had no such practical experience.

While Solovyov rolled down his pant leg, Dr. Wong made a slow and deliberate show of stowing his kit. "But . . . but, surely, it's not terribly necessary that—"

Christopher held up his hands to silence him. "Sure, it's necessary. Doc, what if something happened to me, or Ollie—and Michèle too. You could be the only one left to get us out of trouble."

"Now?" Dr. Wong whined.

"No better time." Christopher played his trump card. "Besides, it was your *medical opinion* that Ollie ought to give his foot a rest."

"What's this I hear about Dr. Wong driving?" Lafrenière asked as she entered from the rover's rear habitation compartment.

Christopher shrugged his shoulders, feigning innocence. "Aw, we just figured that it was about time Doc here got some practice driving the rover."

"Really?" Lafrenière surveyed the expression on Wong's face. "I think he looks scared."

"I am not scared!" Dr. Wong snapped.

"Look, Doc, just for a little while? At least an hour. Then I'll take over if you want." Christopher uncrossed his arms and took a few steps toward Dr. Wong. "It'll be nightfall in three hours. We'll have to stop then anyway."

"I agree with Commander Christopher," Solovyov chimed in.

An obviously exasperated Wong looked at Christopher, Solovyov, Lafrenière, and then back at Christopher. "All right, I'll do it," he sighed.

"Good!" Christopher said earnestly as he patted Dr. Wong on the shoulder.

Lafrenière ran her fingers through her curly red hair. "I guess I could run through the engine start checklist for him."

Christopher pointed a finger at the science specialist and smiled. "I like your attitude!"

He and Solovyov turned and made their way to the rover's forward cab, leaving Lafrenière and Dr. Wong in the laboratory compartment to stow their samples and gear before getting under way. Solovyov sat down at the engineering console at the rear-right of the cab, while Christopher went to the right-seat communications station in front of Solovyov to make his report to Mission Control in Darmstadt.

The Project Ares flights had been called "direct" missions. The small ships employed required no orbital assembly at a space station and the trajectory to Mars did not include a detour to Venus for a gravitational slingshot assist.

The Ares 4 mission had begun three years earlier with the launch of an unmanned Earth Return Vehicle, or ERV, from Kennedy Space Center. The ERV carried a payload of liquid hydrogen, a set of compressors, and a chemical processing unit. Upon arrival at Mars the ERV aerobraked into orbit, using the Martian atmosphere instead of fuel to slow it down. It had landed on the northwestern edge of Lunae Planum, near the southern rim of Kasei Vallis.

Once the Ares 4 base camp was established, the chemical processing plant used the liquid hydrogen cargo and the plentiful carbon dioxide of the Martian atmosphere to produce methane and water. These were, in turn, transformed into oxygen gas and liquid oxidizer, then back to hydrogen that was recycled to continue the process. Most of the propellant produced was used to fuel the ERV, but enough methane was left over to power the yet to arrive long-range rover.

Two years later, the Ares 4 Mars Excursion Vehicle, or MEV, was launched from Baikonur Cosmodrome carrying the four astronauts, provisions, and the pressurized rover currently occupied by Christopher and his crew. Engineers planned a simultaneous launch for the Ares 5 ERV that would accommodate another human expedition three years hence. Meanwhile, the Ares 4 MEV followed a radio beacon to the Lunae site, and landed next to the now fully refueled ERV.

By manufacturing propellant on Mars instead of carrying it from Earth, the Ares direct plan dramatically reduced the launch weight of the spacecraft, and in direct proportion, reduced the cost of the missions enough to make them politically acceptable. But the scheme was not without its critics.

Many questioned the value of sending only four astronauts at a time, and worried about the tremendous physiological risks associated with the nominal sixteen-month surface stays. Others criticized what they perceived to be a lack of backups and redundancy in some mission critical hardware, as well as the absence of continuous communication with Earth.

There were other problems as well. For one thing, the fragile daisy-chain of this tag-team approach was easily broken. The Ares 5 ERV, scheduled for launch a few days after Christopher and his crew were sent to Mars, had been delayed for almost two months due to mechanical glitches with its heavy-lift rocket. Still, science on a shoestring was deemed to be better than none at all, so the missions proceeded.

"... completed without incident. Status of consumables: Water 75.1 percent: fart juice, 72.8 percent ..." "Fart juice" was Christopher's nickname for the methane that fueled the rover. "Oxygen, 69.8 percent."

Solovyov saw Christopher frown as he read the figure from the environmental control status screen. "I believe our oh-two consumption during EVA is running a little higher than we expected. We'll check the status again at our next way point, and I'd like permission to cancel the next EVA at that time if Ollie and I deem it necessary." He paused and turned to Solovyov, who nodded. "Food status is okay ... except Michèle ate the last shrimp salad ..."

"Not guilty!" Lafrenière shouted playfully from the laboratory compartment.

Christopher grinned. "Well ... th-that's all folks! EVA video and telemetry packet to follow. Talk to you again at the next way point. Christopher out." His fingers entered the appropriate commands on the touchboard to transmit the message.

Wong and Lafrenière entered the cab just as Christopher finished his report. "Stop trying to give me a bad reputation," she lectured, wagging an accusing finger in Christopher's direction.

Christopher smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "But it's so much fun!"

Lafrenière muttered something Solovyov couldn't hear, and sat down at the science station beside him. Dr. Wong slid into the left-side driver's seat and strapped himself in, putting on a lap-belt and securing the shoulder harnesses.

As Solovyov and Christopher did the same, Lafrenière called up the engine start checklist on her console and began reading the items aloud. At each point, Dr. Wong either touched a control or brought up a screen and called back a confirmation. Christopher nodded with approval as the two followed the proper procedure to the letter.

By now, a low humming drone could be heard in the background. Solovyov could feel a very gentle vibration in his seat as the rover's methane engine came on-line. Having reviewed the last item on her checklist, Lafrenière turned off her screen.

"All done," she announced.

"Excellent, both of you," Christopher said. "Okay, whenever you're ready, Doc."

Dr. Wong hesitated for a moment before putting the rover in forward drive, releasing the brake, and gently stepping on the accelerator. The rover responded, timidly venturing forth at a conservative ten kilometers per hour.

While Christopher kept an eye on Dr. Wong, Solovyov and Lafrenière settled back to take in the view provided by the cab's wide, wrap-around duraplex windshield—the only window on the rover. A boulder strewn gorge paralleled their path several meters to their right. The rocky terrain of Chryse Planitia slowly gave way to a dustier, almost lunar-like landscape, although many large stones were still in evidence. The landscape bore a striking resemblance to Death Valley, where the crew had spent some time training in basic geology.

Lafrenière unbuckled her seat restraints and stood. "I'm going to get a drink. Anybody want something?"

The three men replied in the negative, and Lafrenière exited the cab.

"You're doin' fine, Doc," Christopher said.

"Uh, thank you." Dr. Wong muttered.

"See, it's not so bad," he added. Dr. Wong did not reply.

The commander snuck a peek at the door of the cab, then turned secretively to Solovyov and Dr. Wong. "Michèle's gonna kill me for telling you this, but it's so funny I gotta—"

He was abruptly interrupted by a loud *bang*.

"What was that?" Dr. Wong gasped.

Solovyov furrowed his brow, trying to identify the noise. It sounded like a muffled howitzer had gone off outside, above and behind them.

"What's going on?" Lafrenière asked as she ran back into the cab.

Dr. Wong shot Christopher a questioning glance, but his foot was still on the accelerator.

Solovyov stared straight ahead out the window. Suddenly before his eyes the ground erupted in little puffs of dust.

Lafrenière returned to her seat and buckled her lap belt.

"Doc—" Christopher began, but he never finished the order.

The duraplex windshield right in front of Dr. Wong shattered into a bizarre, angular spider-web pattern as a meteorite struck the rover. Wong let out a strangled cry, and instinctively slammed the joystick to the right and floored the accelerator as if to avoid a non-existent obstacle. The rover skidded and began to fishtail.

"Turn, Doc!" Christopher shouted. "Turn into it!"

Dr. Wong pulled himself together enough to hear and understand Christopher's words. Manipulating the joystick purposefully now, he turned the rover into the direction of the skid, and slowly the vehicle began to straighten itself.

"The gorge!" Solovyov warned urgently. As Dr. Wong fought for control, the rover assumed a course that was taking it directly toward the menacing fissure.

Dr. Wong squinted his eyes and slammed on the brakes. The master alarm sounded and lights flashed on the control panel, indicating a failure of the rover's anti-skid system. All four wheels locked, and the astronauts sat helplessly as they slid into the gorge.

Solovyov was tossed about madly as the rover went down, his harness chafing at his jumpsuit as the straps held him in his seat. A horrendous scraping noise could be heard as jagged outcroppings of rock scoured the underside of the rover. Seconds later, the front of the vehicle hit the bottom of the ravine and crumpled, accompanied by a softer *thump* from inside the cab, as they came to a bone-jarring halt.

Christopher managed to reach a key to turn off the master alarm. The cab was silent, except for the sound of heavy breathing. Dr. Wong's left hand had the joystick in a virtual death grip, but his right hand was shaking. Beads of sweat covered his face and soaked the collar of his jumpsuit.

"Doc," Christopher turned to Wong, who was still trembling. "Doc! It's okay. Relax."

"I . . . I feel a little dizzy, I th-think . . ." the physician stammered.

"It's all right. Try to relax."

"O-okay. Okay."

"Now, Doc, you're going to have to get us out of here." Wong opened his mouth to protest, but Christopher cut him off. "I can't get out of my seat. None of us can." The rover was pitched forward at a 40 degree angle, pressing the men against their harnesses. "It's all right. You can do it. Just stay calm."

Dr. Wong swallowed hard, and nodded silently.

"All right, carefully now." Christopher's voice was at once reassuring and stern. "Back us out, slow. Nice and slow."

Dr. Wong put the rover in reverse and gently pressed the accelerator. The engine revved up, and the rover backed out a few meters before the ground gave way and they slid back down.

"That's okay, we'll just try again. Do it once more. Gently."

Again the attempt failed, but on the third try the rear wheels found traction and with painful slowness the rover crawled up the side of the gorge. Gradually, the rocky bottom of the fissure receded, until what seemed like an eternity later they backed out over the rim and onto level ground.

Christopher let out a long breath and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Good. Well done." He surveyed the cab. "Is everyone all right?"

"Dr. Lafrenière!" Solovyov exclaimed.

Michèle Lafrenière was unconscious, her head slumped forward in her seat. She had managed to buckle only her lap belt before the rover went out of control, and had hit her head on the console in front of her when they impacted the bottom of the gorge. A nasty bruise had formed on her forehead.

Dr. Wong left the cab to get his kit, and performed a quick examination of Lafrenière upon his return. "No sign of spinal injury . . . ." He pulled up both her eyelids in turn, and shone a light into them.

"I think she has a concussion." Dr. Wong concluded. "Minor, perhaps."

"Then, it's not so bad?" Christopher asked.

The physician shook his head. "No, not really. But I'd like to give her a checkout on the compudoc when we get back to base camp."

"Let's get her to a bunk," Christopher said. "Ollie, we're still in line-of-sight. Get on the horn to Darmstadt. Let 'em know what happened."

"*Da*."

As Wong and Christopher carried the unconscious woman out of the cab, Solovyov went to the right-seat comm station and sat down. He keyed a set of commands into the touchboard, but instead of a prompt to begin transmission, the system crashed. He tried re-initializing the console, and the same thing happened. Finally, he ordered a self-diagnostic, but even that did not come up.

By now Christopher had returned to the cab, leaving Dr. Wong to tend to Lafrenière. He walked up to the comm station and stood behind Solovyov, his hands grasping the seat back. "Problem?"

Solovyov nodded. "The high-gain antenna appears to be off-line."

"What's wrong?"

"I am not certain. Not even the BITE is responding," Solovyov said, referring to the antenna's built-in test equipment.

"Try the low-gain. Relay through base camp."

Solovyov nodded, keying in another sequence. Once again, the system would not respond.

"What's going on?" Christopher asked. He thought for a moment, then answered his own question. "There was a loud bang. Is it possible the external comm pallet was damaged?"

"It is possible," Solovyov nodded.

"All right. We'll go outside and check it out. Worse comes to worst, we'll contact Darmstadt when we get back to Lunae." Gesturing at the impact pattern on the windshield, he asked, "What about that?"

"I do not believe that is a problem," Solovyov said. The duraplex was impregnated with a dye that became visible when critical stresses incurred, but the canopy—designed to withstand moderate impacts—was still transparent. "However, we may lower the cabin pressure to—"

He was abruptly interrupted by a warbling tone as the master alarm sounded again. The two men looked at each other, then bounded to the engineering console. Christopher got there first. The commander deactivated the klaxon, which automatically brought up the relevant status window on the screen.

"Ollie! We're losing oxygen!"

"Switch to the redundant unit!" Solovyov exclaimed.

Christopher's hands flew over the touchboard. A schematic flow diagram depicting the plumber's nightmare of lines and pipes in the rover's underbelly appeared on the monitor. "Backup tank on-line . . . . What the hell? We're still losing oh-two!"

"What's with the master alarm?" Wong demanded as he tumbled into the cab. "What's going on here?"

Solovyov shouldered Christopher out of the seat and took his place. "It is not in the tanks," he said quickly. "It is in the main distribution manifold."

"Can you bypass it?" Christopher asked as he glanced at the oxygen status line. It was reading 31 percent, and falling rapidly.

"I am attempting to do so now," Solovyov said tersely as he entered new commands. The oxygen reading was now 19 percent.

"Oh, hurry," Wong pleaded as the numbers began dropping to single digits.

"I think we've got ourselves a problem," Christopher sighed.

Solovyov was still typing when the count reached zero.

Christopher patted the engineer on the shoulder. "It's okay, Ollie. You did your best."

"What'll we do now?" Wong asked in a tone of virtual despair.

Solovyov stared at the console. He wanted to slam his fist in frustration. Then it suddenly occurred to him that the rover had one other source of oxygen. The engineer entered a new set of commands, and as he did so, the low rumbling of the motor diminished to silence.

"I have taken the engine off-line," Solovyov explained. "I am now tying in the oxidizer tanks to the liquid flash evaporator, and redirecting the output to environmental control."

"How long will that give us?" Christopher asked.

"The system was not designed for this, so there will be a continuous sixty-four point nine percent loss to the outside. However . . ." Solovyov finished typing, "I would estimate . . . approximately five hours."

Christopher spoke aloud Solovyov's next thought. "But it's gonna take us at least eighteen hours to get back to Lunae."

"And just *how* are we supposed to get back to base camp anyway?" Wong shouted. "We don't have five hours if we bring the engine back on-line!"

"Electrolyzing our water supply will give us another half an hour, perhaps more," Solovyov suggested.

Wong looked on the verge of tears. "That's . . . that's not enough!"

"So, we have a little over five and a half hours of air," Christopher said. "It's a start. Let's build on it." He looked in turn at Solovyov and Wong. "Come on, I want ideas. How can we stretch that?"

The engineer was silent, but Wong opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something. Then he stopped, as though he'd thought better of it. He changed his mind again, and his mouth proceeded to open and close several times in succession like some fish in distress.

"Doc," Christopher allowed himself a grin. "If you have something to say, I want to hear it."

Wong nodded. "I think . . ." he paused, and swallowed deeply. "I think —I believe . . ." He summoned up some spine and finally managed to blurt it out. "If, there is—*isn't* enough, for all four of us . . . we will, we'll have to leave someone behind."

Christopher's fleeting smile disappeared instantly.

"That is not an option!" he exclaimed. Wong cowered, and his head seemed to shrink into his chest like a tortoise. Christopher took a deep breath, and his sudden flash of fury vanished as quickly as it had erupted.

"It's not an option," the commander repeated, a little more calmly. "Geez, Doc, you're talkin' crazy. *Think* about it! Whether there's three or four bodies isn't going to make one hell of a difference. Besides . . . there are some people itching for an excuse to kill Ares. One of us dying would fit the bill nicely." He looked at Wong and Solovyov again. "Come on, guys—*think! I want some ideas!*"

It is said that when a person is facing certain death, their entire life flashes before their eyes. But Solovyov recalled only one incident. His first job out of university had been with NPO Precision Instruments. The young graduate's pride was matched only by his desire to impress himself upon the veteran engineers of the bureau. But on the morning of his first day the alarm did not go off, and he was two hours late for work. The manager of his division glared at him with his arms crossed sternly across his chest . . . much as Christopher was doing now. Embarrassed and ashamed, Solovyov had muttered a string of apologies for his tardiness, vehemently promising never to be late for anything again.

Late . . .

"Late." Solovyov murmured aloud.

"What?" Christopher asked.

"Late." Solovyov looked Christopher directly in the eye. "The Ares 5 ERV. For the next mission. It was launched almost two months late."

Dr. Wong and Christopher stared at him silently. Not waiting for a reply, Solovyov got up and went over to the comm station. He activated the console and displayed the most recent Ares itinerary uplinked from Mission Control. "The Ares 5 Earth Return Vehicle was scheduled to be launched at the same time as our departure in preparation for the next mission, but it was delayed by a mechanical difficulty."

"Where is it going to land?" Christopher asked, excitement creeping into his voice.

Solovyov scrolled down the data until he found the information. "Latitude 22.3 degrees north, longitude 85.1 degrees east. Near the eastern rim of Fesenkov Crater."

"When?"

"It is scheduled to aerobrake into parking orbit in 5 hours, 17 minutes."

"Still too far for us to drive, but . . ." Christopher shook a finger at the screen. "If . . . if the ERV was brought down *here* instead, our problems would be over!"

"*Da.*"

"All right, Ollie!" Christopher patted the engineer on the shoulder. "Get suited up, and see what you can do about getting our communications back."

The three men went to the rover's airlock. Christopher and Dr. Wong ran through a checklist to ensure that nothing was missed and helped Solovyov into his spacesuit. Once he was fully geared, the engineer and the commander switched roles. Solovyov and Wong assisted Christopher into most of his own suit—except for the gloves and helmet. Christopher would monitor the progress of the EVA from inside the rover, but he would be ready to assist at a moment's notice. Both he and Dr. Wong kept their helmets beside them so they could talk to Solovyov through the built-in short-range radios.

Solovyov locked down his helmet and pressurized his suit. After a leak check and a radio test, Christopher handed him a standard repair kit. Then the Russian entered the airlock and cycled it. Unlike the spacesuits of the early space program, the ones used by the Ares astronauts were high-pressure models that eliminated the need to pre-breathe oxygen. The throbbing sound of the pump diminished to silence as the chamber approached the ambient pressure of the Martian atmosphere outside. Finally a green indicator illuminated the wall panel. Solovyov opened the outer hatch and stepped outside.

The sun was red and small, already low in the dust-dimmed sky as nightfall approached. Long shadows were being cast by the boulders, and as he surveyed the landscape a terrible irony struck him. There was plenty of oxygen locked up as mineral oxide in the endless store of ruddy rocks that surrounded the rover, but they had neither the equipment nor the energy to extract it.

Immediately to the right of the airlock hatch was a narrow ladder that allowed access to the roof of the rover. Solovyov held his kit in his right hand while his left steadied him on the ladder. After just a few careful steps up the ladder, he could peer over the top of the vehicle. Immediately in front of him was the rover's scientific instrument bay. Currently empty, it had been designed to support experiments mounted outside that needed direct exposure to the Martian environment. Just beyond the bay, at the rear of the vehicle, was what was left of the external comm pallet.

He keyed his radio. "Solovyov to Commander Christopher."

"Yeah, Ollie," the commander acknowledged from inside the rover. "How's it lookin'?"

Solovyov clinically outlined what he saw. There may have been a mathematical term to describe the shape the high-gain radio dish was in, but he didn't know what it was. It no longer even remotely resembled a parabola. Dark scorch marks emanated from the point of impact, an intricately mangled mess of broken metal that had once been the rover's external comm pallet. The low-gain antenna was nowhere to be seen.

"Is it beyond repair?"

"*Da*. It looks like it took a direct hit from a meteorite. It is completely destroyed." Solovyov had the spare parts to repair individual components, but nothing to replace the entire system. "I am coming down," he announced as he descended from the ladder and returned to ground level.

Dr. Wong's voice appeared on the loop. "What'll we do now?"

"Think of something else," Christopher replied. "Any ideas, Ollie?"

Solovyov stared out toward the horizon. Mars was about half the size of Earth, so the horizon looked closer than what he was used to. Could a solution be just as near? Both the rover's high- and low-gain dishes were totally inoperative. If these were beyond repair, there was no way they could contact Earth—*unless* . . .

A sudden inspiration hit Solovyov, but he dismissed it immediately. There was one very, very slim possibility, but it was far too outrageous for him to mention aloud.

Christopher saved him the trouble. "Say, what about . . . the Viking 1 Lander?"

"What?" Dr. Wong stammered.

"Ollie, would it be possible to use the high-gain dish on the Viking?" Christopher asked hopefully.

"Possible," Solovyov said hesitantly. "But—"

"Good!" Christopher cut him off. "What would it take to get the unit up?"

Before Solovyov could reply, Dr. Wong cut in. "Why, that's . . . that's outrageous! That machine is almost forty years old! It'll never work. I'd get a better response doing CPR on a corpse."

"We got data back from Voyager until a couple of years ago," Christopher pointed out. Designed to explore the outer solar system, the twin spacecraft had been launched in 1977. "So, Ollie, how 'bout it? What do we need?"

Solovyov furrowed his brow in thought. "Judging from my earlier examination of the spacecraft, it appears to be in excellent condition. I did not remove any components from the antenna mechanism or the communications subsystem, so only its age would be of concern. Very well. I have a standard kit with me now. We will also need . . . lubricants, hydraulic fluid . . . a power pack . . . more spare components—see if you can find an extra kit, and a palmtop to interface with the Viking's electronics. Oh, of course—take out a receiver from one of the spare spacesuits."

"All right, I'm going to get that stuff now. I'll be coming out in a few minutes. Christopher out." Solovyov heard a soft thump as he put his helmet down before the channel clicked off.

"Oleg, this idea is sheer lunacy," Dr. Wong whispered. "Tell me honestly. What're its chances?"

"Not very good," Solovyov said bluntly. He believed it was an understatement.

While he waited for Christopher to join him, Solovyov decided to perform a quick walk-around inspection of the rest of the rover. He made his way to the front end of the vehicle, careful to avoid the edge of the gorge. The area was crumpled up like aluminum foil, and the impact on the windshield looked even more menacing than it did from the inside.

"Just went to download some stuff from the computer," Christopher came back on. "I've put on my gloves and helmet. Be out there real soon."

Solovyov didn't know what he wanted from the computer, and didn't bother to ask. As he made his way around to the starboard side of the vehicle, he spotted something silvery among the rusty red rocks. He took a few steps toward the anomaly and identified it. It was the rover's low-gain antenna, blown off the comm pallet and deposited on the ground, the small dish now crushed like a pressed metallic flower.

By the time he returned to the airlock hatch, he could see Christopher's spacesuited figure emerging from it. Once he was out, the commander reached back into the compartment to get the equipment. “Hey, Ollie. Give me some help here.”

Christopher handed Solovyov a palmtop computer, a second standard repair kit, some spools of wire, and other assorted spare parts. His own load consisted of a few small canisters of hydraulic fluid and graphite-based lubricant as well as the spare receiver. The two men walked away from the rover until they were out far enough to see the roof. Then they stopped and looked up. Solovyov pointed, and Christopher whistled softly.

“You know, Ollie, I don’t think we’re going to be able to fix that.”

“I had already come to that conclusion.”

“That’s, uh . . . that’s pretty bad,” Christopher observed. “Looks like ET’s gonna have to find a new way to phone home.”

“What?”

“Forget it. Let’s get going.”

Before setting off for the Viking site, both men topped off the oxygen supply in their spacesuits at the EVA replenish station near the rover’s airlock.

“Listen, Doc,” Christopher said. “Without the rover’s antennas that little helmet of yours isn’t gonna to pick us up beyond about . . .” He turned to Solovyov.

“Eight hundred meters,” the engineer answered.

“You got that, Doc? Eight hundred meters. I want you to try and monitor our progress from the roof camera. If we need you out here and we’re out of range, I’ll raise my arms . . . like this.” Christopher walked in front of the cab window and demonstrated the gesture.

Solovyov saw Dr. Wong nod behind the duraplex and reply “Understood” verbally. He glanced at the chronometer built into the left wrist of his spacesuit. “The ERV will aerobrake into parking orbit in 4 hours, 51 minutes. Commander, we must hurry. We are losing precious time.”

“Ollie . . .”

But Solovyov had already broken into an awkward run toward the Viking 1 Lander, which was now just over a kilometer east of the rover.

“Ollie! Wait, slow down! Don’t need to run!”

Solovyov ignored him. It was difficult, with all the equipment he was carrying, but he managed a well paced jog. The light Martian gravity helped tremendously. Time was of the essence. The chances of re-activating the old Viking were slim at best, but it was their only hope for contacting Mission Control before the rover’s oxygen was depleted. Even a few minutes could turn out to be crucial. Why, Solovyov wondered, could Christopher not understand this? Sometimes, the man’s infernal cheeriness was more than enough to—

Something seemed to grab his right foot, and the rusty red ground rushed up to meet him.

"Ollie!" Christopher exclaimed as Solovyov fell, his shout loud enough to distort his voice over the suit radio.

The light gravity saved Solovyov once again. It gave him just enough time to let go of his tools and put his hands in front of him to break his fall. His gloves hit the ground, his elbows buckled—and his faceplate stopped within a centimeter of a large, jagged red rock.

Solovyov moaned and rolled onto his side.

"Ollie!" By now, Christopher had reached the engineer. "Are you okay?"

"I . . . I believe so."

"Can you stand?"

Solovyov tried, and stopped instantly as pain radiated from his foot. He gingerly attempted to move it again, but the pain only increased as he did so. "My foot," he gasped. "My right foot. I think . . . I have sprained it."

"Doc!" Christopher barked. "I think we need your services already."

"Okay . . . I'm almost, already partially suited, so—"

"*Nyet!*" Solovyov tried to wave him off, a ridiculous gesture the doctor could not have possibly seen. "He must stay with Dr. Lafrenière. Help me up, Commander. There is no time!"

For a moment, Christopher stood in motionless indecision. Finally he said, "All right, stay put, Doc." He went about picking up Solovyov's tools, clipping what he could onto his utility belt and carrying the rest under his left arm. Next he retrieved the palmtop computer, verified that it was not damaged by the fall, and put it inside his right thigh pocket.

The commander took Solovyov's left arm and brought it over his shoulder. He wrapped his right arm around the engineer's waist. Slowly, the two men came to a standing position, then they began the long walk to the Viking 1 Lander. Hobbling along like two drunks in their bulky spacesuits, they made painfully slow progress. For Solovyov, the emphasis was on the painful part.

The radio came on. "Wong to Christopher."

"Go ahead, Doc."

"Michèle is coming around. I think . . . to be all right . . . keep an eye on . . ."

"I'm glad to hear it, Doc." Christopher tapped the side of his helmet as the signal faded in and out before finally vanishing. "Doc?"

"We are moving out of range," Solovyov stated. They had no time to stop and listen, and Solovyov wasn't sure he wanted to hear any more of the doctor's depressing banter anyway.

"Well, I hope he doesn't drive off with the rover."

"Commander!"

"Just kidding."

When they finally arrived at the site of the old spacecraft, Solovyov glanced at his chronometer and noted that the ERV would enter orbit in four hours and thirty-six minutes. A walk that should have taken nine or ten minutes had taken almost half an hour. Solovyov silently cursed himself for his . . . clumsiness.

Christopher noted with obvious relief that the Viking had escaped damage in the meteorite shower. Solovyov cursed again, this time at whatever deities that might exist for choosing now of all times to punish his atheism by leaving the old Viking unmolested for almost four decades while the Ares 4 rover was hit twice in one day.

Christopher and Solovyov made their way to the Viking's northwestern face, the side opposite the soil sampler arm. They found an electronics compartment which would give them access to the communications subsystem, opened it, and got to work. Despite Christopher's help, their progress was hindered by Solovyov's injury. Neither of them carried anything that could be used as a walking stick, so the engineer had to keep one hand on the lander to steady himself.

As the astronauts worked, night fell over Chryse Planitia. Like on Earth, the sun set in the west, behind the two men. Unlike on Earth, the thin atmosphere diffused little light, making Martian sunsets short, but spectacular in their own way. As the sun dipped below the horizon, the salmon-pink sky gave way successively to a brief orange dusk, a dim crimson radiance, and finally a soft rosy afterimage. Blackness rapidly flowed into the vacancy left by the retreating glow.

But the astronauts witnessed none of this. Their only response was to turn on their helmet beacons. Solovyov turned briefly to look back at the rover, and noticed that none of its external lights were on.

"The ERV should have aerobraked into orbit by now," Christopher announced. "Assuming it did, it'll have to begin its deorbit burn in . . . fifty-two minutes to make a landing here."

The exposed electronics compartment was now connected by a spaghetti-like mass of wire to the palmtop computer and receiver clipped to the side of the spacecraft. Solovyov blinked to clear a bead of sweat that had found its way into his eye. He had known from the outset that reactivating the long dormant lander, assuming it was possible, would be a time consuming process.

But the Viking was in excellent condition, and their task was relatively straightforward. All they needed was time. Solovyov glanced at his chronometer, and willed himself not to slam his fist in frustration. They were not going to get it.

"Hey!" Christopher said sharply. "What's the problem, Ollie?"

Solovyov gritted his teeth in frustration. "In order to land here, the ERV must execute its deorbit burn in twenty-four minutes."

There was nothing more to say. At the current position of Mars in its orbit about the sun, it would take at least twenty-five minutes for a radio signal to be received on Earth and a reply sent back.

"We are out of time."

After a short silence, Christopher said, "But . . . but the ERV can receive S-band transmissions through its contingency low-gain antenna. So, what's there stopping *us* from trying to land the beast here *ourselves?*"

"It is possible," Solovyov conceded. "But we need the proper command sequence to—"

"It's in the palmtop, in the subdirectory SCOUT."

Solovyov raised his eyebrows. "How did you know . . . Scout?"

"Sure. Weren't you ever a Boy Scout? You know, 'Be Prepared'? I figured—"

Solovyov waved him into silence as he continued working with renewed determination. "You impress me, Commander."

"Well, we have nineteen minutes 'til the ERV is in range." Christopher became instantly serious again. "In order for it to land here, we must uplink the sequence as soon as it is, because it'll have to begin its deorbit burn two minutes later."

"The timing is very delicate."

"I know. But we gotta press on. We'll finish."

Somehow, they did. Hydraulic lines were filled, leaks were found and plugged. A portable power pack was installed to provide electricity, as the output of the Viking's own thermoelectric generators had decayed below its threshold level years ago. Since they were now to transmit data instead of voice, the spare spacesuit receiver was disconnected. Finally, Christopher boosted Solovyov up to lubricate the lander's high-gain antenna dish.

"The ERV is almost in range," Christopher announced. "Are we ready?"

Solovyov did a quick survey of their work. It was an undignified mess, but all seemed to be in order. "I believe so."

"All right then. Move the dish into position."

Solovyov entered the command into the palmtop's keypad. He waited a moment for the program to take effect. He waited a little longer.

Absolutely nothing happened.

"Ollie . . ."

"I do not understand!"

"We're *really* running out of time this time, Ollie. I mean it."

Solovyov frantically checked the makeshift connections: Wiring, voltages correct . . . hydraulic pressure acceptable . . . .

"Two minutes. Are you sure we did everything right?"

"*Da!*" he exclaimed adamantly.

The commander exhaled deeply. "Then there's only one thing left to try." With those words, he took a step back from the lander, and Christopher—in his youth a running back for Creighton University—raised his right foot and delivered a prodigious kick to one of the Viking's silvery terminal descent propellant tanks.

"Try it now."

Solovyov took a second to recover from his amazement, then punched the command into the palmtop again.

The Viking 1 Lander's high-gain antenna came to life.

"Works every time."

"Must have dislodged some dust . . . ." Solovyov muttered by way of explanation.

"Whatever." Christopher looked at his chronometer. "That's it. We are coming in range, standby . . . now! Punch it, Ollie!"

The engineer re-initialized the palmtop and entered the command to activate the high gain antenna once more. The Viking's parabolic dish responded, turning toward the eastern horizon and lowering itself to an angle of 21 degrees above horizontal.

"I have acquired the ERV's transponder signal. I will now uplink the new command sequence." Solovyov loaded the program into memory, then entered the code word KVUGNG to initiate its transmission to the spacecraft approaching overhead.

"It is done," he said at last.

"Is there any way to know if . . ."

"*Nyet*. There was no time to echo the sequence back." No way to know whether the software patch was installed correctly. Solovyov looked at his chronometer. "If it was successful, the ERV will initiate its deorbit burn in twenty-eight seconds, and will begin its descent two minutes, four seconds after that."

There was nothing more to do but wait. An uneasy silence fell between the two men. Solovyov wanted to return to the rover to await the ERV's landing, if it ever came. His foot was killing him. But Christopher made no move to leave.

Solovyov cleared his throat, and decided there was no better time. There was something he wanted to get off his chest.

"Commander Christopher."

"Uh huh?"

"There is something I must tell you."

"Shoot."

Solovyov said bluntly, "I do not like to be called . . . 'Ollie.' "

A pause. "Oh," Christopher said at last. Then, "Well, to tell the truth, I never liked the way you call me 'Commander'. It's too . . . rigid, too formal. I don't like rigid and formal. So, how 'bout we both quit while we're behind and call it even?"

"That would be acceptable," Solovyov said simply.

Over a minute had elapsed since the command sequence had been transmitted to the ERV. When Christopher spoke again, Solovyov expected an order to return to the rover. Instead it was, "Hey, turn off your light."

"What?"

"Turn off the light," he said and did just that.

Puzzled, Solovyov followed suit. His eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, and he looked up into the night. The spectacle filled him with wonder.

A global environmental restoration effort coordinated by the space-based Earth Observing System had helped clear terrestrial skies, but no starscape on the home planet could match what the two men were seeing now. They were enveloped in an eternal ebony blanket, studded by crisp, jewellike points of light which shone with their full intensity. It was almost as if nothing stood between the men and the cosmos. Almost, but not quite, for Mars still had a tenuous atmosphere. Although the stars barely flickered, each bore a faint pinkish tint bestowed by the dust perpetually aloft in the Martian sky.

"You know," Christopher said, "when people start living here permanently, I think someone'll have to change the words to 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.' "

"I know about that!" Solovyov exclaimed.

To the south was Phobos, the larger and nearer of Mars' two natural satellites. It shone as a pale oval in the heavens, about two-thirds the apparent diameter of the familiar Moon.

"Hey, look at that!" Christopher was facing the west, and his finger pointed upward.

Solovyov followed his arm into the sky. He squinted and a few seconds later, he could see it too. A star, a little brighter than the rest, was moving—rapidly—down toward the horizon.

"Deimos?" Christopher asked skeptically.

"No. It is too bright, and moving too quickly." For the first time, Solovyov felt hope swell within him. "I believe . . . it may be the ERV."

"You're right!"

As the two astronauts watched, the point of light briefly became a very short, intense streak before finally disappearing below the horizon.

Christopher whooped and jumped, hanging in the air for a moment before coming down. “Right on, right on!” He punched Solovyov’s shoulder. “We did it, Oleg!”

“The ERV *will* touch down in thirty-one minutes,” Solovyov said with a hint of a smile—an expression Christopher couldn’t see.

The engineer turned to gaze upon the faithful old Viking. He could just barely make out the tiny Mutch Station Plaque. Its words could not be read in the darkness, but its meaning had never been more clear. This monument was more than a tribute to one man; it was a symbol of the spirit, drive, and dedication of humanity to spread forth from its African cradle, cross the continents, sail the oceans, take to the sky, and soar beyond.

When next humans walked these rusty red plains, perhaps they would make them their home. On that day, Solovyov hoped, a more fitting memorial would be erected at this place, and people would come to Chryse Planitia to marvel at an artifact of the past—and of the future.

Oleg Solovyov faced the Viking 1 Lander again, and in a gesture of unmitigated sentimentalism, saluted. ●

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we evolve toward what we choose to be.

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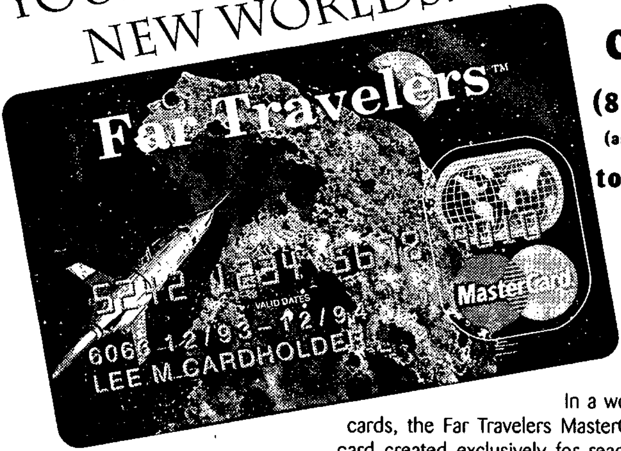

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE
GALAXY
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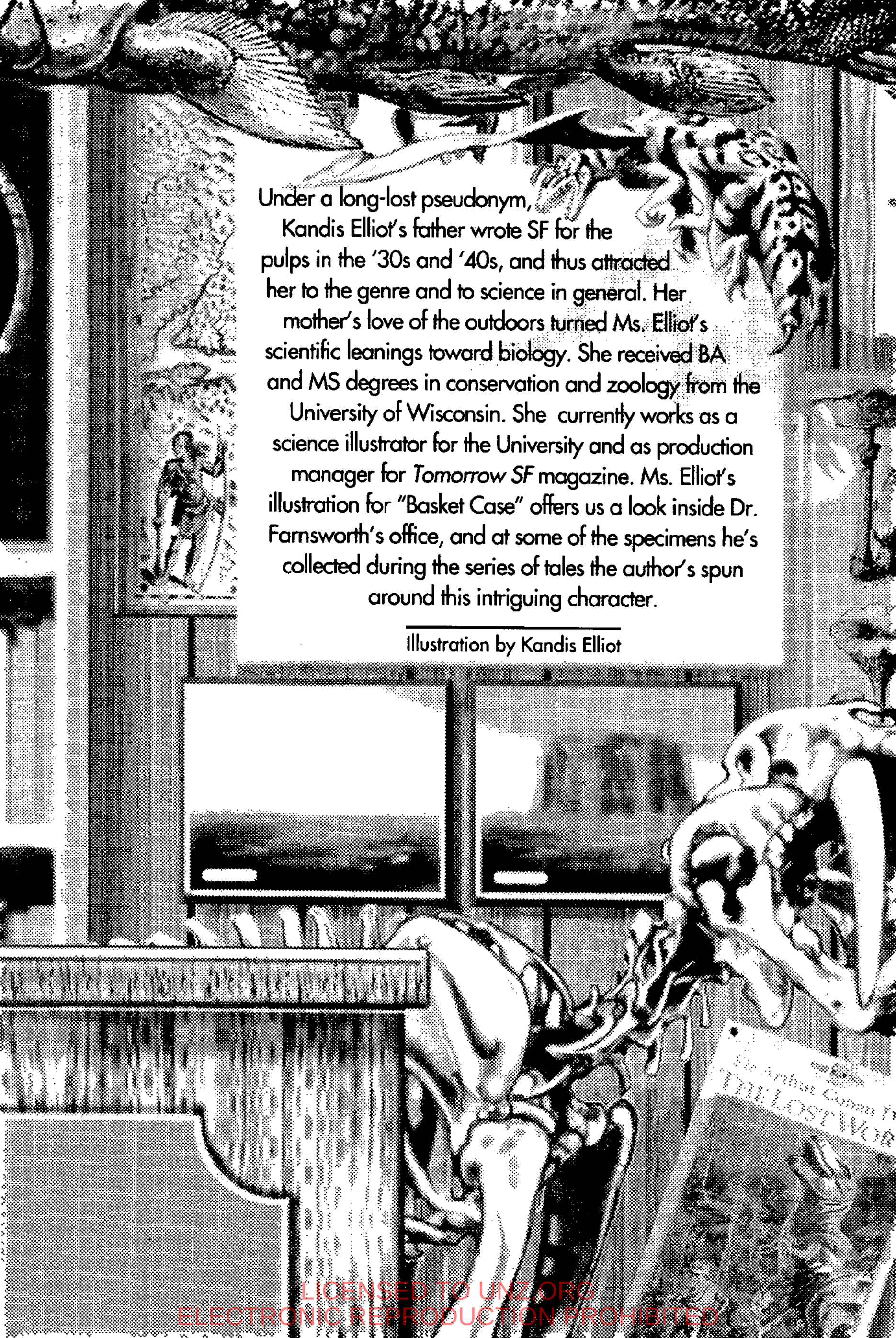
Kandis Elliot

BASKET CASE



Under a long-lost pseudonym, Kandis Elliot's father wrote SF for the pulps in the '30s and '40s, and thus attracted her to the genre and to science in general. Her mother's love of the outdoors turned Ms. Elliot's scientific leanings toward biology. She received BA and MS degrees in conservation and zoology from the University of Wisconsin. She currently works as a science illustrator for the University and as production manager for *Tomorrow SF* magazine. Ms. Elliot's illustration for "Basket Case" offers us a look inside Dr. Farnsworth's office, and at some of the specimens he's collected during the series of tales the author's spun around this intriguing character.

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

A radio on the bedroom nightstand blared thrash-&-slash howls of all-night punk rock as loud as Larry Prescot dared to dial it. He'd turned the radio on after coming home Friday night, when he first heard the silence, or what should have been silence except he kept hearing sounds he knew weren't there; so all weekend he listened to guaranteed real sound which even the neighbors verified, with two calls to the cops.

Larry lay beside the radio and lit another cigarette and watched the smoke curl up into the opalescent haze above the bed, fogging the wheat-patterned globe hanging cockeyed from the ceiling. Two bulbs inside. One burnt out, the other dim from the two-day smog he'd worked on. "Which one's you, Larry, ol' bud," he asked himself in a coarse voice. "The dim bulb? Or the burn-out?" He laughed, a rasping sound as dry and sore as his throat.

His mind turned the light's wheat sheaves into the gray-white, dripping plasmoid moss and bulb-things on the tepui. Cigarette haze encouraged the memory of that monstrous freak mesa and its cold jungle of waist-high, cheesy lint. Larry made his eyes stare at the light, made them not see the tepui or its damned slimy growths. Not see Carsten's body covered by gray fungus instead of clothes or skin. Not watch Maryanne fling herself off the knife-sharp, perfect right angle of the cliff edge, to sail straight down for God knows how many seconds until she hit bottom somewhere below the haze.

He flicked his cigarette in the vicinity of a tray on the floor beside the bed. Ashes sprinkled on several dozen butts, crumpled empty packs, a mound of other ashes, and the latest-opened cigarette package containing one more offering. Larry had emptied the tray the last time he'd gotten up to puke, sometime Sunday morning. Jack Daniel's bottles kept the ashtray company on the floor.

Night behind the bedroom's drawn shades had grown darker with the setting of the half-moon, hours ago. Now a wind rattled the panes; occasionally, above the radio, sleet tinned on the aluminum awnings: one of Wisconsin's notorious early winter storms overtaking Indian summer. The room had grown steadily colder through the night.

Larry turned red-rimmed eyes toward the bureau clock. Four in the morning. In another hour he'd get up, shower—when he first got home he had showered until the hot water ran ice cold, then did it again. And again. Even now he could smell the tepui, but had realized sometime during the weekend that the stink came from his field clothes, which he'd peeled off and tossed in the laundry basket in his bedroom closet. He should've tossed them into the outside dumpster, and would as soon as he had the strength to go near them. Tepui stink: Vaseline mixed with paint thinner. He sucked a mouthful of cigarette smoke and let it flow up his nose.

At least he knew *why* Maryanne died screaming. He and old man Carsten and Maryanne had chased in vain after Mike's shrieks in the night, somewhere close to dead-center of the flat crown of the tepui, far from the sheer-sided rim.

Larry didn't give a damn if the sights kept flooding back, or how cold the room got, or how bad it smelled. He was barely aware of his own radio's din. What he refused to hear were the sounds.

The sound of screams in the night. And far worse, those quiet sounds in what should have been silence. No animals lived on the tepui. No birds, frogs, crickets, nothing of the Earth below. The tepui had fungus. Lichens. Algae. Slimeballs, mold blankets, plasmodiums. *Oily* shit. Always wet, always oily, greasy, waxy. And in the dim gray mists of day, whenever he or Mike or Carsten or Maryanne stopped walking and held their breaths, they could hear the *sound,* just above the pounding of their own blood through their ears, so quiet but constantly around them, the flutters of a million invisible, tiny fairies: *whiss, whiss, whiss*. Mike's screams through the darkness wailed like an air-raid siren by comparison.

When Maryanne's body exploded at the base of the tepui, the ground team's helicopter had gone up immediately to pluck Larry off that alien mountain. He'd been the only one left.

The sizzle of sleet on the windows transmuted into the muffled, cottony sound of snow. Larry couldn't really hear it over the radio; it was more a sensation born of the memory of descending storm fronts and snowy nights. Nonetheless he concentrated on the illusion of benign sound with one ear while the other siphoned in the discordant rock music, which he'd always loathed. Two days and three sleepless nights of such effort, to mask out that hideous *whiss, whiss* . . . .

He caught himself with a jolt. The dead cigarette stub lay beside him in a burnt circle on the white sheet.

"Jesus, Larry," he chided himself, "don't lose it now. You're a *survivor,* man." He brushed the butt onto the floor, then checked the clock: ten after four. He hadn't fallen asleep, only drifted. He found the last cigarette in his package, lit it, sat up higher against the headboard and took long drags. His exhalations blew white with breath as well as smoke; there seemed no heat in the room at all. Then he remembered cracking a window sometime last evening to get the stink out. Okay; cold would keep him awake even though bone-tired weariness glued him to the bed.

He could swear he still heard it. *Whiss, whiss, whiss,* like a relentless snake slithering across the floor. He fumbled for the radio, cranked the dial all the way. The intensity of the sound made his ear drums distort like little trampolines and his nervous system dance with adrenaline. A good feeling. Alive.

Whiss whiss whiss . . . .

He sucked in drag after drag and watched the smoke curl to the wheats in the light. The butt glowed as though the only source of living heat in the room. He reached down to grind it into the ashtray.

Pushed the glowing stub into something soft. Slimy. A *fooommp* exploded above the radio and a substance wet, cold, *hot, moving* wrapped around his wrist. He heard a high wailing scream that he wasn't sure came from him or something else as he brought up his arm encased in a torch blazing from elbow to fingertips.

Larry shrieked and pounded the fire into the bed and the bed caught and then his pajamas and his hair. Then he was hearing Mike again lost in darkness, and Maryanne, and himself, and their combined wails finally drowned out the hellish sound of the tepui, and the neighbors banging on the front door, and the sirens in a snowy Wisconsin night.

"I'd like to know who the devil let him go home," said Charles D. Farnsworth, scowling at an array of police photos being laid out on his huge oak desk. The photos depicted what was left of Larry Prescot's bedroom. Farnsworth looked up at a balding Dean of Students, now occupying his guest chair and emptying a Manila envelope. "Our lad should have been sequestered straight from the helicopter. Either into a debriefing laboratory or a jail cell."

"I'd have punted him into the psych ward," the university dignitary murmured. (To Farnsworth it sounded like "Odd a pun' im inna syk war.")

Farnsworth knew that the dean's acumen belied his diction and physique. Roy "Cement Mixer" Walashekski had been a University gridiron star worthy of his moniker. Despite his years and added layers of tallow, he still looked like one of those ape-human hybrids which Americans conscripted for their absurd notion of football, standing as tall as Farnsworth's six-three, though outweighing him as much as would a draught-horse.

The dean tried mightily to focus on his photographs. A multitude of small, huge, yellow, black, red, living, and artificial eyes drew his attention to bubbling aquaria, walls of biological illustrations, grinning skeletons, and mounted creatures frozen in mid-step, swim, or flight on the office's floor, dodging between volumes in bookshelves, suspended by wires from the ceiling. A bush-baby's hypnotic, giant eyes stared obliquely at him from its perch on one side of Farnsworth's expansive desk. "Charley, I'd lay odds at least *half* of your zoo here is illegal. Heaven help us if we're ever raided by federal customs agents."

"You are possessed of a keen eye, Roy," Farnsworth agreed, deciding that the faculty's variation on the dean's nickname—"Cement

Head"—was not fully warranted. "In fact, my beasties are *all* rare, endangered, or extinct. Do recall, I have complete state and federal authorization for search, seizure, and study of zoological contraband. I see you admire my tarsier. Fetched him on my recent trip to the East Indies. The natives believe if he points that middle finger at you, you'll be a dead man in a week." Farnsworth turned the stuffed specimen so that the unblinking glass eyes stared directly at the dean.

Roy Walashekski pulled his attention from the fateful finger with visible effort. Students actually liked the ex-linebacker—doubtlessly, Farnsworth considered, because old Cement Mixer spoke their language. Whatever that was; certainly not the English with which the colonists supposedly once communicated.

"Near as anyone can figger," the dean was saying, "he got off the chopper and took a powder while the cops and the meat-wagon guys were arguing over who gets to bag him first. You remember that scene. Every reporter in town saw that AP video of Maryanne Roth coming down. Place was crawling. Larry Prescot vanishes into the crowd, cops think he's in a hospital security wing, hospital guys think he went to the hoosegow."

"Good Lord. Nobody bothered to check Prescot's home?"

" 'Course not. He wasn't missing, so naturally he wasn't there."

"Naturally," Farnsworth sighed. He remembered that fortuitous footage of the girl's body plummeting out of low clouds down the sheer side of the tepui. A ground crew video buff had been idly shooting a skein of geese at the time. Local news stations had run amok with replays.

The dean hammered a bananalike finger on the photo array. "Carsten and his students went after biology. You tell me if Larry Prescot brought some back."

"I thought the authorities consider this to be an open-and-shut case." Farnsworth removed a large magnifying glass from a drawer full of fossils and studied glossies of Larry Prescot's charred bedroom. "It does indeed appear Mister Prescot was drinking and smoking in bed, fell asleep, and became another statistic. Ashtray, two liquor bottles." A closeup detailed the blackened, but unshattered, glass objects.

"Actually, one of those bottles was unopened," said the dean. "Other's just missing four, five shots. —I asked the cops if they'd let me in the place," he explained. "That I had to write the kid's parents something. They were real nice about it."

"This window appears to have been opened before the fire. Hadn't it been sleeting and snowing?"

"For fresh air, I guess. Prescot chain-smoked. Kitchen trash can was full of butts, whole carton's worth. And this is a radio." The dean indicated a melted plastic mass near a kicked-over nightstand. "On and blaring all weekend, neighbors said. Kept his lights on, too."

"Did they call the police?"

"Twice."

The magnifying glass lowered. "And no one took him *in?*"

"Told ya, he wasn't wanted."

Shaking his head, Farnsworth turned to another series of prints. He made a face. "Mister Prescot, I presume?"

"Poor devil. What a way to go."

"What was he wearing? If anything?"

"Examiner said pajamas and a robe. They got ways to tell, I guess. Why you ask? You see something?"

"Au contraire. Where's his wardrobe?" Farnsworth held up a photo of the bedroom closet containing hangers, a heat-warped plastic laundry basket, and a pair of rubber boots.

The dean shrugged. "Clothes burnt up."

"This plastic laundry basket would have, too. And what's this?" Farnsworth pointed out room shots revealing scattered disks—buttons—and a zipper curled on blistered floorboards near the door.

"My kids can't hang up their clothes neither," the dean said. "But it wouldn't surprise me none if he had his bags packed."

Farnsworth put down the magnifying glass and sat back. "Ah, why wouldn't we be surprised, Roy?"

The Dean of Students glowered at the bush-baby, fidgeted, finally pointed at one of two framed photographs on the back wall. "That thing. The tepui."

Farnsworth glanced over his shoulder. The left photo, of ostensibly placid countryside, was labeled neatly in ink, *Event Ground Zero, August 11, 1947*. The right photo said *August 12. Uplift at 1200 Meters and Rising*. The Wisconsin Shield displacement on that summer morning, two years to the moment after the bombing of Nagasaki, formed a snarl of torn rivers and rift lakes and thrust up a mountain like some anvil-shaped volcano, an impotent erection without magma, lava, steam, only a crewcut of never-harvested corn and soybeans.

"Charley, I want to know what's on that dirtball that's worth killing three people for."

Farnsworth almost laughed. "They were collecting a mutated *fungus*, Roy. Not spun gold. For the Mars terraforming project."

Ex-linebacker suddenly shape-shifted into a taxpayer. "You mean that money-sink we got planned with the Russians and the Japanese? Go to Mars and pump it fulla air so it's another Earth in maybe two hunnert years? When *we're* all dead and gone?"

Farnsworth cleared his throat. "Ah, yes. That project. Keep in mind that we might need a back-up planet by then. Long before that, however, when the Martian atmosphere's reestablished sufficiently to produce a greenhouse effect, and thus rain and surface water, we shall introduce the hardiest of organisms as soil-builders and oxygen-producers. As to the tepui's role in that, recall that our 'dirtball' is a protected reserve. Species common to Wisconsin's fields suddenly found themselves forced to adapt, and quickly, to literally a different world. To keep it a virgin habitat on which nature shall take her course without contamination, access is given to research teams quite parsimoniously. Automated instruments collect most data. It seems that the last team's biological samples showed one of the surviving organisms changing in a rather interesting fashion, growing quite well in often-freezing conditions and under intense solar radiation. Carsten proposed that it might be a candidate for the early terraforming of Mars.

"And all that, Roy, ties in with the toasting of Mister Prescot exactly how?"

The dean shook off a glazed look. "All right. Goes like this. The D.A.'s looking for some profit motive, private agenda variety. Along with a degree, Larry wanted fame and fortune, the kind that comes with this sort of gee-whiz biology crap. Now I figger, you got a few mysterious tragedies, you add this Mars stuff, and you're a hot item for book and movie deals." The dean paused to give Farnsworth a look suggesting similar thoughts regarding him. "Larry's pals say the kid saw you as a role model."

Farnsworth steepled his fingers. "The lad did spend rather much time following me about, now that I think of it. I daresay he impressed me with his interest in biological rarities, but in my opinion it was purely academic."

"Guys kill for love or money, Charley. Prescot didn't go up the tepui for love. It said right in the grant proposal he wanted to collect the moss." A giant hand waved at the menagerie of confiscated contraband filling the high-ceilinged office. "You know as well as me that rare plants and animals fetch a damn good price on the black market. *Carsten* sure as hell got excited about something up there."

Farnsworth considered the more plausible explanation that the tepui represented a biological gold mine for the study—on NASA's credit card—of quantum evolution in a microcosm. Unfortunately, the Dean of Students' scientific mindset matched that of the average football-scholarship recipient, for whom basement *Cannabis* culture represented the epitome of biological research. In an effort to bring the discussion back to the facts at hand, he asked, "Tell me, are they still searching for Carsten and the girl's husband?"

The dean's intensity cooled. He shook his head. "Air search was called off. Been four days. That freak storm must'a dropped 'er to ten below up there."

"You've just *assumed* they're both dead?"

"Your Martian moss don't get more'n knee-high. If anyone was alive up there, all they'd had to do was stand up and yell. Pilots would'a spotted 'em in a second."

"Perhaps not. Preliminary reports suggest that the 'moss' germinates quite rapidly. A man unable to move or stand for four days might find himself overgrown with camouflage."

The dean curled a lip. "Eeeuuw, Charley. Why the hell do you guys mess with all that slimy shit, anyhow? —Sorry," he added, a little, not much, hangfaced. The big man twitched nervously, looked at the bushbaby looking steadily back, then fluttered a hand. "Okay. Mutant corn smut. If you say so." He leaned forward. "What do you think, Charley? Our pal Larry wanted it all for himself? Got a case of nerves or guilt, boozed up and passed out with a lit smoke?"

"No, I am convinced Mister Prescot is quite innocent of all suspicions raised against him."

Roy Walashekski started as though just realizing he'd sat on a tack. "*What?* How you figger?"

Farnsworth waved at the photo array. "Surely Prescot would be a bit frayed after his tepui experience, and I submit he tried to drink to steady his nerves. However, the unopened bottle, and nearly full one, imply he stopped when it started to take his edge off. He was not trying to induce sleep. He left his lights burning, he chain-smoked and lay next to a deafening radio. He opened a window on a cold night. The room must have been freezing. Does that scenario suggest a lad trying to rest? To reconsider a sinful deed, or for that matter think at all?"

"You and me couldn't, but kids nowadays stick that godawful noise in their ears all day and— Well, why *would* he do that? Worried about the cops?"

"If so, he would not have stayed in town, in his own home. In fact, he probably never realized anybody wanted to incarcerate him. I think Larry simply went home unnoticed in the confusion."

"Just to stay awake for two solid days?"

Farnsworth studied his fingernails. "That's the question. Why should a man fear to sleep? Rather sounds like the 'bad trip' induced by some of the hallucinogens students play with, does it not?"

"Huh." The big ex-football star looked perplexed, then ran a gamut of expressions, the face of a man who knew a lot about students, and drugs. "Wait a minute. What if you're way off track here? What if someone *else* killed Carsten and the Roths? A guy thinking he might be next would sure try to stay alert! Goddamn, Charley! Who?" Roy Walashekski's active mind was already end-running around logic. "Somebody who wants the University scandalized and discredited, maybe. State legislature would trash-can the new budget bill—those religious goof-nuts!" The dean grimaced sourly. "Them and their tepui-as-God's Throne bullshit. Man Upstairs sent down his big chair from Heaven, so they can't let just *any* dumb bastard sit on it."

Farnsworth laughed cynically. "The tepui came *up,* as I recall. Like a cork out of Old Nick's champaign bottle. And it does glow in the dark," he noted, referring to the St. Elmo's Fire that danced nightly over the tepui's plateau. Thunderstorms often created spectacular electric shows.

"Maybe the damned thing *is* the devil's work," the dean said. "Prescot certainly died in hellfire."

"I'll offer he didn't die a rational man." Farnsworth turned to the framed pictures on the wall behind. He gazed thoughtfully at the monolith of the tepui, breaking abruptly from the vast rolling horizon of Wisconsin's prairie-cum-dairy farm terrain to eventually rise over eight thousand feet straight up into the sky. The tepui's dark-topped head stretched as flat as the land below for nearly one square mile. It was not the true tepui of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World,* Farnsworth knew, neither carved by slow uplift over the eons nor slowly sculpted by equatorial rainfall. Nonetheless it was, when all was said and done, the most singular, if far less calamitous, Event since the Cretaceous Impact.

And perhaps it was not so benign after all.

Though still thirty-five miles northeast, the tepui appeared immediately visible and eye-riveting as soon as the helicopter rose above Madison's trees and buildings and ascended into a clear blue October sky. While the aircraft quickly left Wisconsin's provincial capital city behind, Charles D. Farnsworth scanned the sinking landscape below, tidy grids of dry corn, still-green alfalfa, and sprouted winter wheat. Amid dark spruces and autumn-dressed oaks, dairy barns with tall blue silos dotted winding country roads. Cut by a wickerwork of streams and rivers, the land rolled gently to the horizon, beyond which on the east lay Lake Michigan, on the west the Mississippi River—and looming just ahead, like an impossibly immense beer barrel, the '47 Event tepui of Dodge County.

"Sure is a big pimple, ain't she, Professor," the helicopter pilot grinned. " 'Least you're lucking out with the weather."

The lone passenger agreed. Indian summer had returned for another week, even more pleasant than the sunny fifties which had provoked Carsten to make his ill-fated four-day campout in the sky. Farnsworth checked a map on his lap. Red-penciled X's and arrows festooned elevation contours.

"Now," he said, "I should like to identify the exact spot of the campsite. Are you sure you can zero in with precision?"

The pilot, a gum-chewing, cocksure female built like the proverbial masonry latrine, grinned between her aviator's sunglasses and fleece-collared ace's leather jacket. "Been tellin' ya, Doc, I could put you down on the tentpole. Got the exact coordinates right here." She tapped one of the multitude of gauges and dials in front of her. "I took 'em up, I put 'em down."

"Unfortunate you never got them off."

The gum-grinding grin vanished. "Yeah," came the quiet reply. "I was in the search party, Professor," she volunteered after a moment. "But after I hauled that Prescot guy off, what he said and all, I didn't have much hope 'a finding anybody. Not alive."

"Indeed? What did Mister Prescot say?"

"Like I told the investigators, the guy was stark raving bonkers. Prescot said he, the whole team, heard the sounds right away as soon as they had camp set up, and—"

Farnsworth turned to the woman. "Sounds? What sounds?" Nobody had mentioned the team's hearing any "sounds." He momentarily recalled Prescot's blaring radio.

"Yeah, Prescot must'a been still hearing 'em." The pilot tapped her temple with a finger. "Spent the whole trip back with his hands clamped over his ears. I'd guess the wind's kinda funny up there. That static halo might pop and crackle, too, get real eerie. Can't be as eerie as listening to a man scream all night, though. Said it was Mike Roth. All night." She gave a little shudder. "Christ, that'd be enough to drive anyone nuts. Go looking for the guy, never find him—no wonder his wife jumped over the edge."

Perhaps, Farnsworth considered. Although the female zoology grads he'd met possessed a strength of will that could drive nails.

The pilot thumbed toward the passenger's transparent door. "Speakin' 'a going over the edge, Doc, you sure you want to try that thing from up there?"

Farnsworth glanced out at the thirty-foot-long nylon tube-bag lashed to the landing strut platform. "I'm Hang IV rated." He could see that the pilot, like all powered-craft flyers, held little regard for hang gliding. "I assure you, madam, I've ridden thermals to well over eight thousand feet. A sunny day like this will give me good upwelling on any of the cliff faces."

The pilot's scowl swung back to the gummy grin. "You just wanna be the first, don'cha, eh? A hunnert glider jockeys a month petition to jump off the tepui and—"

"Tut, tut. I just want to assure a ready 'back door,' as they say."

"Took me all of eight minutes to snag Prescot, Doc."

Farnsworth gave her a sly nod of acknowledgment. "And well done. However, it takes me a mere thirty seconds to snap into my glider harness."

With an it's-yer-neck shrug, the pilot turned back to her controls and watched the nearing tepui. Had its dark stem not connected it to the Earth, it would have taken the appearance of a 260-hectare mushroom cap, floating above a cottony inversion cloud trapped at seven thousand feet.

The pilot answered a radio inquiry with a repeat of ID numbers and mission. Even though they had clearance and were expected, the tepui's airspace was carefully monitored. This would be their last contact; electromagnetic jitterbugs created a radio dead zone above the tepui's 7800 foot level—one of many reasons why only well-planned professional expeditions were allowed to cast themselves adrift up there. The helicopter had been climbing ever since leaving Madison. Farnsworth noted they'd ascended almost level with a line of brilliant pop-strobe aircraft warning beacons, powered by solar batteries, along the nearing crest of the tepui's flat summit.

Lurching on curling updrafts, the helicopter passed over the lip of the sheer drop-off. Distance-blued and misted checkerboard farmland more than a mile beneath them was abruptly replaced with the tepui's homogeneous, very-much-closer pale landscape. Frothy growths below, always bent at an angle away from prevailing westerlies, danced in the prop wash. Farnsworth had seen the tepui's crown many times before; it had changed little after its first settling-down decade. Remnant polyhedrons of once-plowed fields were still vaguely discernible through the lifting fog, as were the crumpled, weathered, long-dead textures of cornfields, hedgerows, small woodlots, and the collapsed toy blocks of what had been homesteads: two of them, shattered, along with their occupants, during the initial uplift shaking.

The chopper flew to the plateau's near-dead-center and hovered. The pilot pointed through her cockpit bubble. "Carsten's tent, Professor."

Farnsworth peered down at the fuzzy white hemisphere of what had been a blaze orange, four-man polyhedral tent. "I see it."

"You can make out their trails where they chopped through the moss." The helicopter followed one more-or-less-straight dent in the overall fabric of the waist-high ground cover. After a hundred meters exactly it turned right, one hundred meters later, right again, and so back to the campsite. "Want to follow 'em all?"

Looking back and forth between his map and the scenery, Farnsworth said, "That won't be necessary. I'm quite oriented."

"Full flyover might be a good idea, Doc. Seeing as how you look like a man expecting trouble." She thumbed at the Smith & Wesson .45 semi-automatic holstered at his waist.

"Just in case my theory might be wrong," he explained, "which my theories very seldom are. Now—" He peered around at what seemed a normal horizon that did not represent an abrupt edge of a world a half mile distant. "Wind is still westerly?" At a nod, he added, "To the east cliff then, if you please. I'll set up the glider there. Mark the position so you can keep an eye on it with the ground scope."

The helicopter hovered twenty running strides from the cliff to let Charles Farnsworth lower the hang glider's case onto the white-gray surface of the tepui. As he prepared to rappel himself and a bulky backpack down, he called through the door, "Once again: one flare for trouble, two flares if I feel it necessary to spend the night. Otherwise, I shall join you in the target field by, oh, tea time."

"It's yer neck, Professor," came the yelled reply.

As soon as the helicopter vanished, rather disconcertingly, below the nearby rim of the cliff, Farnsworth opened the long, blue nylon case, extracted the wing's aluminum frame, and set up the hang glider. His trained eye noted good, steady thermals starting to upwell at the cliff's rain-eroded lip, uncomplicated by the strong winds hitting the tepui's other side. By four in the afternoon, eight hours from now, lofting conditions should be just right, provided the sun shone steadily. And it looked like it was going to, Farnsworth thought with waffling gratitude. The tepui had not warmed from its freezing night, but it would slowly turn from a world of crispy, delicate, interwoven lace into a slime-mire that would make a trek through a toxic waste dump palatable by comparison.

He moored the eager TRX-140's cables to a piton pounded into the ground, watched the black and yellow glider rest, bounce slightly in a wayward gust, and come to earth again, held like the kite it was. He tied a transceiver radio, which would not function until he was off the tepui, to the hang straps, and finally headed back to Carsten and company's fungus-engulfed tent.

By the time he reached it (twenty-minute walk, he noted: makes it about a nine-minute all-out run in field boots), the rarified air had warmed: upwelling thermals at the cliff edges would soon form a flow barrier around the mesa's circumference, calming the high-altitude wind still more. Intense, brilliant sunshine poured over the surface of the tepui, heating the face of the little world in the sky. The life which called the plateau home now sprang out of its stupor. Fungal bulbs lost pelts of hoarfrost, grew shiny with their protective dermal coating, and looked for all the world like colorless wax apples, pears, and kumquats placed in decorative groupings here and there. Tucked into pockets in the moss rose feathery red, fernlike fungus-alga associations, unfolding their lacy weave to the sun, which refracted and glistened in rainbows from their oil-slick surfaces. Conventions of wormlike plasmodiums began to stream underfoot, sending minuscule, slow rivers of pseudopods out to scour the tepui's bleak surface for nourishment. A number of them, or else one giant clone, had claimed a pair of hiking boots left beside the tent, covering the erstwhile footgear with mobile hyphae chemically turning the leather to pulp. One boot-top featured what appeared to be a disembodied hand, alternately contracting and extending.

Charles Farnsworth could not help but marvel at such fine biological delights. No boreal or montane lichen, pine or aspen had ever blown spore or seed from the Rocky Mountains or Canadian tundra to colonize what should have been a perfect home for them. No, indeed, because lowly Wisconsin fungus and soil bacteria from Below had too quickly become the first survivors, and then absolute masters, Up Here. All had discovered long-dormant, unused potential in their ancient genes, little tricks and secrets that had remained hidden, but obviously not forgotten, for nearly three billion years while other life came and went and came again on the face of the Earth.

Three billion years ago, Farnsworth considered, the Earth and her brother Mars were very similar worlds. And then something happened to the red planet, atmosphere dissipated into space, huge waterways dried up, and life, if ever there was any, vanished. Here, Farnsworth thought, looking at the tepui's newest, most prevalent mutation of some once-recognizable puffball, or corn smut, or potato rust, or American Elm blight, *here* is a being that could help make Mars live again.

The mushroom-colored, mosslike growths wadded in various-sized clusters, from handfuls of little stubby pencils, to sticklike shrubs that might fill a five-gallon bucket, to bales of tinder faggots heaped high one on another, all like gray-white interlocked culms of wheat scythed by a lunatic reaper. When the heaps of filaments piled themselves too high, they collapsed under their own weight, their tensile strength limiting them to a five-foot upper dimension. The mycelium bent and gave in his gloves, depositing an oily sheen on whatever it touched.

Martian moss, Farnsworth mused wistfully.

The tent's mesh flap was missing. Through the open portal he took inventory of the contents, all covered with gray-white fuzz but still possessing recognizable shapes: a pair of rubber barn boots, a belt coiled like a flannel snake, metal and leather carrying and collection cases, a camera, an aluminum messkit with a plastic fork and spoon neatly set across an empty food concavity. In one area lay several lumpy cylinders of various lengths and widths, some discernable as charting tools, hand microscopes, and other field equipment. The tent's aluminum struts still held the solid mylar sheeting in a geodesic dome configuration, although the tent was rapidly developing the appearance and texture of a tennis ball.

"I say," Farnsworth muttered to himself, "Where are the sleeping bags? And their duffel?" Surely they brought extra clothing for their four-day visit. *So,* he thought, *this closet's empty, too.* And as enchanting as the stars might be at this elevation, nobody would have the stomach to sleep outside in an area known for nostril invasion by plasmodiums. Thoughts of the tepui's night sky brought his gaze back to one of the shapes near the field equipment. A meter-long, large cylinder he now recognized as a small telescope. A relatively clean nameplate was etched "Michael Roth."

Farnsworth moved away from the tent, took his binoculars from a side pouch of his backpack, which he had not taken off, and scanned the vicinity in a circle. About fifty yards away he saw the vaguely familiar shape of another telescope, a bit larger than the one in the tent, set up on a tripod and facing the northern sky. Had he not been looking for that exact configuration, he would have overlooked the mass as had all the aerial searchers, mistaking it for just another fungus-clotted, ancient tree branch protected from total rot by long winter seasons.

A cadaver-sized mound of white greasy mold glistened a few strides away from the telescope. "Mister Michael Roth, I presume," Farnsworth sighed. With his sheath knife he scraped the cocoon of mold away from what he estimated was a face. The skin was eroded by millions of microscopic hyphae starting to burrow, but cold had perfectly preserved the man's expression of inviolate horror.

Looking for pockets to retrieve some scrap of identification, Farnsworth discovered that Mike Roth wore no coat. Or pants. Or anything except boots, which contained feet without socks. By sheer luck a searching glove came down atop a metal suspenders-buckle, hidden beneath a fungal pom-pom. Feeling around for other items beside the body, he retrieved a hand-lens, ballpoint pen, and two large plastic coat buttons.

As he stood and silently pondered the objects, Charles Farnsworth heard a sound. Though the air moved around the tepui even on the most windless days, his ears and the hair prickling on the back of his neck knew it wasn't the soft swish and sway of an occasional breeze on delicate fonds. A *whiss, whiss, whiss* moved steadily up from the surrounding vegetation like rhythmic footfalls on a distant gravel road, or the murmur of speech from another room, or the flutter of sparrows through thick evergreens, *whiss, whiss,* just above the threshold of hearing.

Then it was gone, leaving sweat trickling down Farnsworth's ribs and his hand fastened to the butt of the Smith & Wesson.

He pocketed Roth's buttons, hand-lens and other small remains and retraced his steps to the camp. The body reposed near enough to the scope; why hadn't the others found it, brought it back to camp, signaled for help? Surely his wife could not have been restrained when she heard the cries. "All night. Bloody hell."

Evidently Roth must had been running about in a blind panic, gone mad, *fleeing* them; and at the end, through design or coincidence, fell where his ordeal had begun. By that time he'd been alone on the tepui.

"Well, then," Farnsworth said aloud, "we've located Mister Roth, Lord rest his soul. That leaves us with old Tom Carsten. Where would you be after a night like Mike gave them, eh, Charles, my boy?" Immediately answering himself, he unfolded the map from his pocket, consulted it a moment, then pushed his way through the moss toward a spot marked on the map by a circled X, whereat, ostensibly, resided the team's signal rockets.

The heat of late morning imbued the moss with ever-changing qualities. At first firm and moist with frosty condensation, it grew more pliant and slimier as its waxy coating, a protection against excess water and radiation, softened to a consistency reminiscent of ninety-weight gear oil. What in early morning had been a solid hedge of five-foot fungal bushes now became an expanding forest of discernibly mobile, squidlike tentacles and dead men's fingers. By the time he'd reached the fungus-furred cube representing the signal box, pungent slime coated Farnsworth's duckcloth field trousers like gelatinous kerosene. On top of that he was soaked to the waist with the tepui's ever-present condensation. The singular plateau might as well have been a lake, the water held aloft by a terrestrial, square-mile-wide living sponge.

He scraped until he found a latch, then opened the box. Skyrockets, carefully labeled as to color codes and messages each had represented to a team's ever-watchful ground crew below, still waited in neat, undisturbed rows. Bright yellow plasmodiums veined each jelly-oozing cylinder.

Had Carsten never reached the signal rockets, Farnsworth wondered, or had he, too, discovered them all rendered inert by the tepui's hungry residents?

He let the box lid fall shut with a wet splush and began walking around it in ever-enlarging loops. When he'd traced a circle fifty yards from the signals, he assumed Carsten had not so quickly met Mike Roth's fate. Where then, when you want somebody below to see you?

"To the nearest edge, and wait for sunrise." Farnsworth peered at the horizon, frowning when he saw that the closest was the western edge—the one Maryanne Roth chose. Almost directly opposite the lip where the tethered hang glider waited. Farnsworth started west, his nervousness growing, he realized, with the subliminally soft *whiss, whiss, whiss* he again heard all around him.

It came from no discernible direction, and he finally concluded that the sound originated from the moss itself. Some collective sound of hyphae elongating across one another, perhaps added to expansion movement generated by the warming day. Though increasing in volume to a conscious level, the sound could never be called loud; nonetheless something horribly *menacing* imbued the Martian moss's voice, something almost—Farnsworth cracked a grim smile—unworldly.

Halfway to the tepui's western cliff he stumbled over the lump he knew at once represented Tom Carsten.

The old botany professor, covered by new moss like a fur shroud, lay spread-eagled and, Farnsworth discovered, face down. The attitude was so reminiscent of a man shot in the back that his gloves flailed at the moss to uncover any possible wounds. No wounds. And no clothes. Carsten died with his boots on, his watch, and his belt. His trademark wire-rim glasses were gone, no doubt flung just inches away by the impact of his fall, and now lost under new growths.

Whisss, whisssss, sang the tepui all around.

Automatically Farnsworth searched the ground beside the body, found a mucous-covered wallet, key ring with ten keys, another hand-lens—he could hear old Carsten's classroom admonition, *if you don't carry a hand-lens, you ain't no biologist*—and a little notebook, its messages dissolved. Farnsworth pocketed the items absently as he stood and listened to the soft hissing sound filling the air.

He kept looking at the leather belt, buckled loosely around the man's bony hips. He wanted to ask, *why the devil would a man take off his pants, then put his belt and boots back on?* But his mind played an odd trick, and the murmured inquiry came out, "How the devil can a man take off his pants without unbuckling his belt or taking off his boots?"

Whiss whiss whiss. Louder. Right *behind!*

Farnsworth whirled, .45 in hand and aimed at—

Carsten's shirt. Or maybe it was Roth's. Or maybe one from Maryanne's missing duffel; the fabric was so interwoven with hyphae one couldn't tell. Except that it was a shirt and, at Farnsworth's quick motion, had halted its stalk over the heads of the moss bushes and rose up like a nervous cobra, sleeves dancing as though inhabited by the invisible arms of a palsy victim.

Man and shirt faced each other across a ten-stride distance that might as well have been the space between Earth and Mars. Farnsworth felt his jaw drop. The shirt, standing on its tailored hemline on the apex of a moss bush, twitched and gyrated like laundry on a clothesline. Without releasing its footing it pointed one sleeve at him, then the other, then twitched its neckline for all the world as a hound tests the air for scent.

Button-down collar, Farnsworth thought. *Carsten's shirt. Chap dressed well for a Midwesterner.*

The shirt lowered and came toward him. Fast. The outstretched sleeves were reaching for his throat as he squeezed the trigger and the Smith & Wesson splashed five holes through the garment's heart, barely standing it upright in the air. It fell to the trampled area around Carsten's body, lay still for three breaths, then seemed to gather itself. The bullet holes widened until they merged into one large opening, which then realigned and flowed together seamlessly once again. Farnsworth knew he'd just witnessed the method by which clothing undressed itself from a belted and shod body. The shirt's hemline rose up behind and its lowered sleeves stretched out, almost touching his boots, like a worshipper bowed in abject supplication.

Whisss, whissssss . . . .

His ears clamored for his mind to hear: *Something Wicked This Way Comes.* Yet his attention riveted to the thing at his feet. Slowly Farnsworth crouched, one hand ready with the pistol, his other going to a breast pocket for his hand-lens. He'd barely brought it over the hyphae-inundated cloth when the shirt sprang for his head. He ripped the garment away, not before it coated his face with gelatinous ooze and filled his mouth and nose with nauseatingly potent, caustic fumes. The shirt twirled itself around his grasping hand. He felt his grip loosen as the slime-soaked fabric wrung blood-stranglingly tight over his forearm.

Whiss, whiss, whiss. To your right! Closer—

In one powerful motion he trapped a piece of the shirt under his boot, ripped his arm free, grabbed the shirt's collar and flung it in the air. Before it even began to fall he'd emptied the Smith & Wesson. In mid-air the shirt exploded in a ball of fire. It hit a moss hedge in a drenching spray of soaking dew and sizzled out.

By the time Farnsworth pirouetted a quarter-circle he had a fresh clip in the .45 and the gun looking at where he'd last heard the new sound creeping up on him.

A pair of pants stood up between moss bales. *Jeans,* Farnsworth thought. *Michael Roth's.* The pants lurched a step toward him, then dropped and slithered forward like a two-tailed worm, making a loud *whiss, whiss* and they came on as fast as a man could stride.

Farnsworth flung off his backpack, whirled and sprinted for the other side of the tepui. Halfway to Carsten's tent site he saw another shirt off to the side, inch-worming its way atop the moss beds at an alarming speed. The next moment his peripheral vision caught sight of a distant silver-mink coat, which he interpreted as someone's field jacket blooming with hyphae streamers. The bulky coat moved too slowly to catch up; so did a lumbering bedroll, visible for a second, negotiating an old fencerow.

The pants had also lost ground by the time Farnsworth spotted the black and yellow hang glider across the surface of the moss field. Panting laboriously from his sprint in mired, sopping clothes, he stopped and turned to buckle the pistol into its holster and judge the speed and agility of the second shirt—fast and adept, following some sixty yards back. He pulled out his kerchief to wipe slime off his face. His skin stung with the substance; his eyes would soon water almost to blindness.

As though recognizing his kerchief as some long-lost relative, a small white square, either another kerchief or someone's boxer shorts, popped out of a nearby moss hump and danced in meaningless paroxysms. Farnsworth turned for the glider and dug in with the last of his breath.

He dove into the harness already snapped to the frame of the glider, heard the *whiss, whiss* approaching behind before his jammed-on helmet muted it, yanked the tethers free and picked up the aluminum downbars. With the glider's fifty pounds on his shoulders Farnsworth ran for the edge of the cliff. He felt the big wing pick itself up; then his own feet, still running, left the ground. As he sailed beyond the precipice he thought he heard a distant *splat* like a soaked towel tossed at a shower curtain.

And then only the wind whistled past his ears.

He draped his arms loosely over the horizontal bar, felt the harness snugging against his waist, and got his breathing under control. The patchwork of late fall browns on the Earth below, even hazed by distance, looked gloriously colorful compared to the grays of the tepui. For a long moment he let his eyes feast on nothing but the beautiful, reassuring face of rural Wisconsin. He glanced back at the tepui, already a quarter mile behind yet still looming like a wall, and as he did so he divined a shadow on the yellow mylar over his head. He looked up. The piercing mid-day sun was eclipsed by the outline of a shirt, clinging to the upper surface of the wing.

Farnsworth stared at it for a full minute. "What a persistent sod you are," he murmured, his words blowing away in the wind.

At one mile out from the tepui, the radio he'd tied to the hang straps began to pop. He twisted around to fetch it, noticing that rigging, cables, essentially everything felt slippery. How quickly molds had colonized the glider's surfaces in the short time it stood unattended—and half of that floating on its tether lines.

"Professor Farnsworth, can you copy? We are following your flight, Doc, come in please," the radio crackled.

"Farnsworth," he yelled into the pick-up. "I am descending to our rendezvous. Prepare the antiseptic. Make sure you hit me before I touch down. Do you copy?"

"Roger. Nobody here 'preciates a dirty bird."

The helicopter's fire hose hit him with a spray that knocked him twenty feet back up in the air before he stalled the wing and drifted down to stay. Soaked to the skin, shivering and light-headed from the altitude shift, Farnsworth never realized how humble orchard spray could take on the luxuriousness of perfumed kisses.

"What the hell's *that*, Doc," asked the steadfast helicopter pilot, whose dogged monitoring through the groundbase scope had spotted him when he was only yards off the tepui.

Farnsworth, toweling his face, followed her pointing finger to a dissolving glob drooling off the upper surface of the TRX-140.

"I do believe it to be a Martian," he said.

Dean of Students Roy "Cement Mixer" Walashekski, along with the chief of police, the D.A., and as many reporters and curious faculty colleagues as could fit between, over, and around the bubbling fishtanks, stuffed creatures, mounted skeletons, and other permanent residents of the office, stared wide-eyed and shut-mouthed at Charles D. Farnsworth as he summarized the results of the dead shirt's dissection. The stuffed bush-baby's saucer eyes stared back at all of them.

"The mycelium had used the weave of the garment to give organization, and thus complexity, to its own body, you see. Non-woven material such as the tent mylar, leather, plastic, metal and so on were only superficially colonized. The hyphae were highly specialized, as is evidenced by coordinated movements—"

"Excuse me, Professor," said a reporter actually taking handwritten notes, as opposed to portable computer punching, "what's hi-fee and mice, uh—"

Farnsworth sent the man his famous student-wilting "insufferable-ignoramus" glance, then explained, "Mycelium is the scientific term for the body of a fungus, which is neither plant nor animal. Hyphae are the individual filaments that make up the body. The strings in a ball of string, if you will."

"Professor, how'd you *know?*"

"I didn't, of course. That is why I insisted on a firearm and the hang glider. If Dean Walashekski's theory of human complicity proved correct, well, there's no hiding place on the tepui. However, based on Larry Prescot's behavior during his final hours, I myself hypothesized that evidence from the campsite would show the deaths of Tom Carsten and the Roths, and probably Prescot's as well, to be caused by psychosis induced by fungal toxins. Certain mushrooms are quite notorious in that regard, and it would have been impossible to purify every mouthful of camp food. Now as I was saying, the tepui moss—" He glanced at the reporter again. "Which is a misnomer, a moss *is* a plant, but to simplify this I shall use common vernacular—the tepui 'moss' grows in a random mass in the wild, and in such a configuration remains harmless, although we find the same very intriguing rudiments of coordinated activities."

"Such as, Professor?" yelled someone in the back of the crowd.

"For example, interaction of mycelia-tips between two adjacent organisms. Long strands rub and entwine with neighboring bushes all during the warmth of the day. The sound of the activity is quite noticeable."

Roy Walashekski sat in the guest chair on the other side of the big oak desk as though he hadn't moved from his last visit, while Farnsworth finished his techno-babble-filled interview and the twenty-some other people pressing into the office finally drifted away, wondering if their questions had really been answered. Only then did the big ex-football star open his mouth. He said slowly, "Charley, you went up on that tepui knowing it oozed something that killed four people?"

Charles Farnsworth felt his cheeks redden. He didn't quite want it to sound so heroic—although Cement Mixer's expression seemed more that of a man confronted with grandstanding idiocy. "Examining the campsite for clues, finding the bodies, and all the while carefully monitoring physical reactions to exposure, required someone with considerable professional expertise. Of course I went up fully prepared. Not only was I inoculated against fungal invasion and toxicity, I insisted the helicopter's chemical firefighting tanks be filled with fungicide."

The Dean of Students shook his head. "At least *I* played with a helmet," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Charley, how'd their ever-blessit *clothes* get after you? *Why?*"

Having already addressed that question ad nauseum, Farnsworth sighed and studied the covered Petri dish which he'd brought from his lab for reporter show-and-tell. Little balls of fuzz sprouted from the block of agar within. "Roy," he began, "fungi are strange bedfellows on this Earth. You might think of them as very, very old beasties that wanted to be animals, but didn't quite come all the way. They have to eat like animals. They have chemoreceptors—taste buds, you might say. Depending on what they want, they'll move toward heat or cold, dryer or moister ground, and so forth. They're not immobile like plants. They don't have roots as such."

"Mushrooms move around?"

"Mushrooms are the fruit of two mated parents. Underground, those parental mycelia are moving all over the place. Microscopically, of course. Similar to an amoeba's flowing and streaming."

"But you think Carsten and Mike Roth were suffocated by—"

"Their own clothes. Yes. Providing the tepui moss with a large surface grid of regular, and probably nourishing, filaments—cotton shirts, woolen outerwear—was like giving them a skeleton. Upon that they braced their contractile hyphae. Muscles. As the two men discovered."

"Why not Maryanne Roth and Larry Prescot, too?"

"They were next. Something they did, or did not do, gave them a few extra hours to get off the tepui, one way or another. And to anticipate your next query, I would theorize the following scenario: Michael Roth, the astronomy buff, couldn't wait to set up his telescope. Ergo, he spent more time away from the tent the very first night, thus more direct exposure to the fungi. One assumes, since he did not willfully shed his clothes, he did not know what was attacking him—weakly at first, then with ever more strength. He must have felt grasped by invisible phantasms.

"And if I were Carsten, I would have joined Roth for at least a little stargazing while the lower echelon, that is, the two other students, finished up with data collections and evening chores. I daresay he may have assigned Mrs. Roth the task of preparing supper—elderly faculty never quite divine the nature of new social politics. In any case, Carsten picked up *his* extra load of contamination. If Maryanne Roth found him already covered with fungus, the dear girl might have surmised some similar fate for her husband and, in emotional extremis, hurled herself off the tepui. Prescot was rescued in hardly better shape minutes later. And since he raved about everything except mobile laundry, evidently he was not attacked as I was. I suspect the hyphal sensory network needed a few more days to develop."

"Jesus, Charley. I could puke. Man-eating fungus."

"My good fellow, fungus has dined on humanity for eons. What the tepui mosses didn't have enough of was warmth."

The dean's eyes popped. "They were *cold?* They've lived up on that tepui for fifty years! And they were *Wisconsin* toadstools before that. They should'a *laughed* at turning into popsicles!"

"If not, they'd best develop a sense of humor. Mars shall be somewhat chillier than the tepui. You see, up there I became an infrared source that called to them like a beacon. When my handgun's muzzle-flash made my shirt attacker burst into flames, I saw the connection between the tepui's moss and Larry Prescot's fiery demise. Larry had unwittingly given the moss a very pleasant new home—until he opened his window. When the room temperature plummeted, I imagine that a lit cigarette appealed to his infected clothing like a friendly campfire. Unfortunately, or perhaps very fortunately, that waxy cuticle which the fungi developed as protection from constant dew, frost, and ultraviolet radiation, is also flammable as petrol as soon as it's out of water."

"That's why his closet was empty," said the dean slowly, nodding. "It got suddenly *too* warm for 'em. They jumped from the fry-pan right into the fire."

Farnsworth concurred. "I must say, I shall never look at my laundry basket with quite the same eyes again. Thank the Lord, Larry Prescot managed his own way of decontaminating himself. The Earth has been spared any spread of the . . ."

The Dean of Students stiffened rigidly. "What is it, Charley?"

"I say. What has become of Maryanne Roth's remains? Have they been released to her parents yet?"

"Not with the investigation pending. I assume they're—" The dean paled. "Body bag in the morgue."

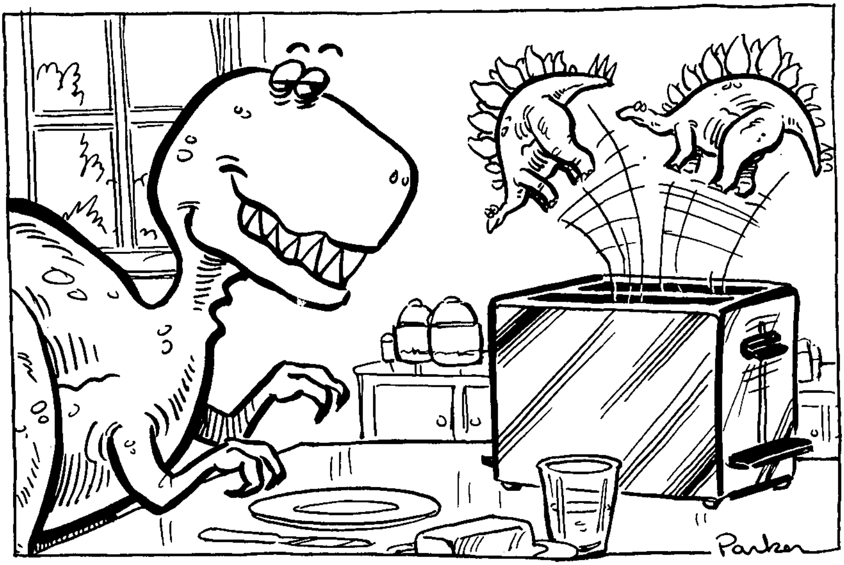
"With her clothing?"

The dean paled further. He grabbed the desk phone like a fumbled football and started punching buttons. "City Morgue?" he said after a moment's wait. "Makovitch? This is Roy Walashekski, Dean of Students at the University. Yeah. Yeah, that's right, Maryanne Roth. One of my students, right. Listen, Mak, I gotta check. She still with you?"

"Make sure they don't touch anything," Farnsworth warned. "Don't even open the bag. Just establish that it's still in the drawer."

The dean repeated the instructions. He cupped a hand over the mouthpiece. "Mak's going down and check on her himself while I hang on." He turned his attention back to the phone.

They waited. ●



waiting to explode

Hard on the outside   soft on the inside

I remember hard candy
we sucked on enamel eroding
waiting for the syrup explosion
sweet outside sour inside

Soft on the outside   hard on the inside

I've met some sweet women
with sour lives who keep trying   again
always seem to find a man
nice outside bad inside

Hard on the outside   soft on the inside

I know this world is just a crust
nice cool soil   floating on a molten hell
volcano bides   festering boil
cold outside   hot inside

Soft on the outside   hard on the inside

I hear the center of the sun is
hot hydrogen denser than metal
its outer atmosphere tenuous unreal
the hot inside wants outside

everything is waiting to explode

—Joe Haldeman

ELS:
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74
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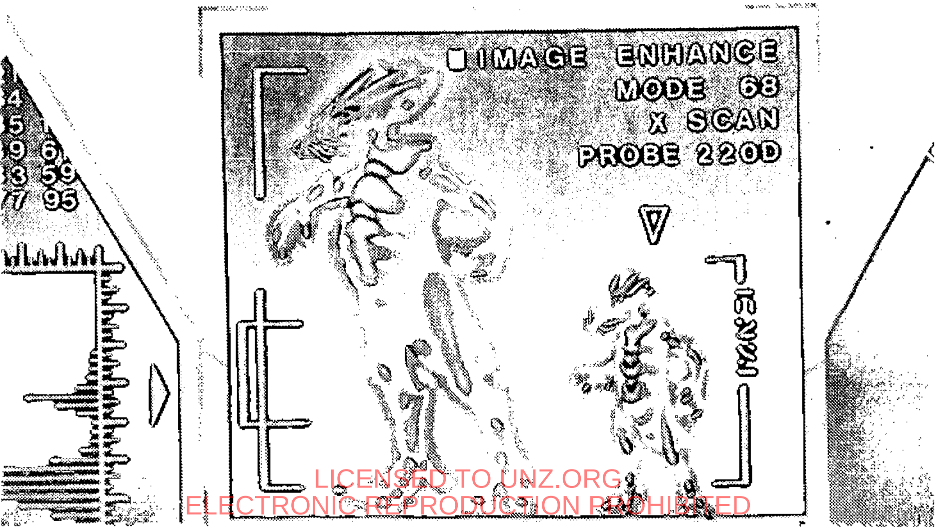
19

Charles Sheffield

THE BEE'S KISS

Charles Sheffield recently won the Nebula award for his novelette "Georgia on My Mind" (*Analog*, January 1993). That tale will be the title story of a new collection coming out from Tor next February. Mr. Sheffield's most recent novel, *Godspeed*, was published by Tor in October 1993.

Illustration by Gary Freeman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MODE 68
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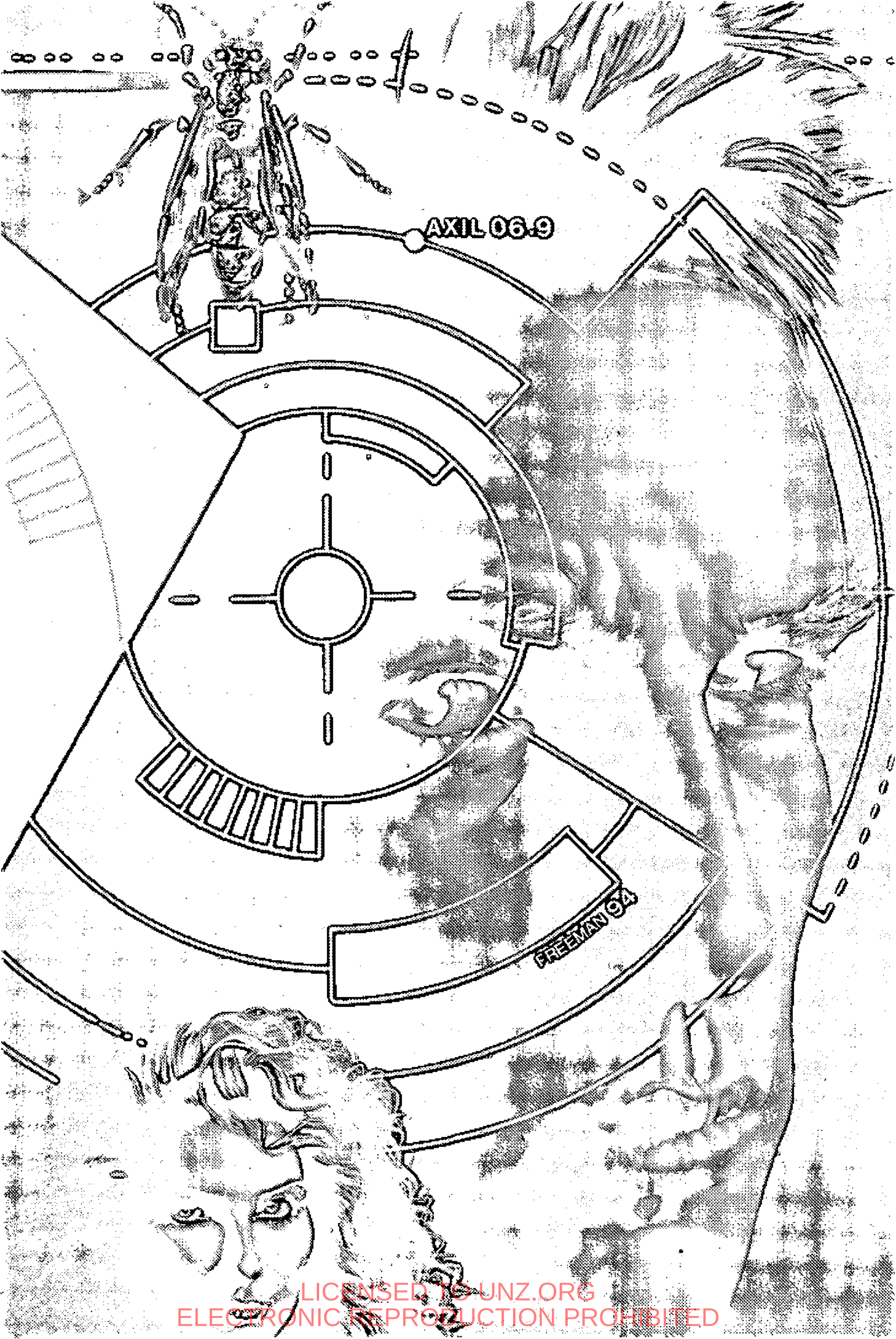
AXIL 06.9
FREEMAN 94

The moth's kiss, first.
Kiss me as if you made believe
You were not sure, this eve,
How my face, your flower, had pursed
Its petals up; so, here and there
You brush it, till I grow aware
Who wants me, and wide ope I burst.

"Your guilt is not in question. Nor, given the outrage of your offense against the Mentor, is your punishment. Yet the past few days have provided anomalies for which a curious mind still asks an explanation. Will you tell?"

The room where Gilden sat was huge, low-ceilinged, dimlit and smoky. The face of the Teller seemed to float on the dead air in front of him, pale and thoughtful, and the questioning voice, as always, was gentle and reasonable.

Gilden shook his head the fraction of an inch that the metal brace permitted. *The past few days*. He grasped that phrase and kept his mind focused on it. He could have been sitting in this chair for months or years, drifting in and out of consciousness as the drugs ebbed and surged within his body. But here was a data point.

Or was the Teller lying, for her own inquisitorial purposes? Perhaps it had been a year, five years, ten years since the arrest. Perhaps his location had been changed a score of times. Perhaps, even, he was no longer on Earth, but transported to one of the Linkworlds within the Mentor's domain.

"You are a clever man." The Teller, patient to infinity, had waited a full two minutes before speaking again. "You think, so long as you have information of value to the Mentor, or interesting to me, so long will your punishment be delayed. But that is a false conclusion. Permit me to demonstrate."

Gilden's forearms were clamped to the arms of the chair. The Teller leaned forward and pressed a blunt cylinder to the upward-facing palm of Gilden's right hand. The flat disk at its end glowed white-hot. Flesh sizzled and sputtered, black smoke swirled. The stench of charring flesh filled the room.

Gilden screamed and writhed. The pain was unendurable, beyond description or comprehension. Somehow he remained conscious as the disk burned through to the bare bones of his hand. Then, at last, the Teller lifted the cylinder.

"One taste of torment. But observe." She nodded, to where Gilden's palm was renewing itself. New flesh pooled eerily into the blackened cavity, new skin crept in to cover it. "We are of course in derived reality.

Your body is unmarked. But before you take comfort from that, let me point out the implications. Your condign punishment can continue—and will continue—for many, many years, at the level of pain that you experienced for only a few moments. For although your specific offense is unprecedented, the nature of your punishment is not. Do your recall the name of Ruth el Fiori Skandell, Bloody Ruth, who sabotaged one of the Mentor's aircars and thereby assassinated two of his lesser sons?"

Gilden grunted, deep in his throat. The Teller took it as a sign of assent, and went on.

"Skandell holds a melancholy record within the Linkworlds. After her sentencing she lived on for sixty-three years, enduring at every moment an agony at least as bad as yours. Virtual punishment is no boon, when pain exceeds reality. Someday, some unfortunate will break Skandell's record. It could be you, Arrin Gilden. Behold, one more time, the re-enactment of your crime."

The room darkened further. The Teller's pallid face vanished. Only her persistent voice remained, moving closer to whisper intimately into Gilden's ear.

"*When,* I know already. *How,* you have been wise enough to describe to me. Now I must know *why*. Why would the world's leading electronics designer and miniaturist throw away career, bright future, and life itself? What compulsion would lead him to work night and day for a full year, at a level of ingenuity marveled at by all who have studied the process, with a level of risk great enough to intimidate the boldest, to attain such a momentary and apparently trivial gratification? Look again. And tell me *why*."

The scene began as the ant-sized voyeur threaded its way toward the Mentor Presumptive's bed-chamber. It crept along pre-computed hair-thin curves, following a path where the monitors' sensing fields did not quite overlap. To learn the position of those curves, Gilden had thwarted a dozen elaborate and ingenious computer security systems. (And now he was not alone in paying for his skill. Twenty guards, if the Teller could be believed, had been sentenced to a lifetime of labor in the ice-world quarries of Decantil, for their failure to detect the voyeur as it insinuated itself into the Mentor Presumptive's sanctum.)

The Presumptive's new bride had been drugged during surgery and the elaborate preparations that followed, but before leading her into the bed-chamber the physicians had followed instructions. All drugs and sedatives were sluiced from her body. She lay now, dark-skinned, naked, and slightly trembling, on a great circular bed sheeted with blue satin. The Presumptive stood by the bedside. He was humming softly to himself as he removed a belted robe of dark crimson. Beneath it he was naked. The sensors of the voyeur zoomed to take in the Presumptive's facial expression as he moved rampant onto the bed and gripped the woman's quivering thighs. There was a long moment, a pause for savoring and anticipation. At the moment of entry the voyeur expanded its field of view to include the woman's face.

This time the surgeons had done a good job. The afferent nerves linking sex organs and hindbrain had been channeled and enhanced, but not too much. The bride's ecstasy during love-making took her close to the point of death, but after the Mentor Presumptive's climax she was still alive.

The display changed, turning to show continuing muscle spasms in the bride's inner thighs. The view moved slowly up her body, to pause at a slack-lipped mouth and at eyes where only a sliver of iris showed between whites and upper lids. At last the display moved again, halting at the Presumptive's flaring nostrils and full lips.

"You and I have watched this many, many times." The calm voice of the Teller cut into the recorded sound of the Mentor's heavy breathing. "Your resting pulse rate is fifty-seven beats a minute. Your current pulse rate is one hundred and sixteen. Would you like to tell me why?"

"I explained."

"You explained indeed. In response to my stimuli you explained too much. First it was your stated intention to sell copies of this, the recording of a most secret and sacred element of the Mentor Presumptive's life. But while you have dozens of other illegal recordings in your quarters, there is no evidence that you have ever attempted to sell any one of them—or indeed that you would know how to undertake this or any other illegal enterprise. I reject that explanation. Next you explain that you intended to use the recording to blackmail the Mentor Presumptive, or even the Mentor himself. A preposterous suggestion indeed, since the first hint that such a recording had been made would lead to your arrest and death—as indeed it did and will. You then explained to me that you considered this a final test of technique for your new sensor. If it could penetrate this innermost and highly protected sanctum, it could penetrate anywhere. True, perhaps, but a dangerous notion indeed for anyone who wishes to live. The Empyrium must be able to keep its secrets.

"So I am forced to my own conclusion. You have *explained*, Prisoner Gilden, and explained again and again. But you have not *told*. Tell me now. Why did you do this, and throw away a life most valuable to the Mentor?"

Arrin Gilden stared into darkness. He moved his weary head forward to rest it against the cool metal of the brace.

"Could we have some light?"

"I see no reason why not."

As the room brightened the Teller's face slowly appeared a few feet from Gilden's chair. If this was derived reality, the illusion was perfect.

Gilden recognized a dreadful irony. The technology that would doom him to an endless lifetime of torture was the twin of the one that had caught him. No one in the Mentor's entourage had discovered his tiny voyeur device, or even dreamed of its existence. It was Gilden himself, unable to leave the looped reality offered by the voyeur, who had been discovered. And even that might not have been fatal. Many people suffered from illusion lock. But the equipment in Gilden's apartment had also been running its external display. Everyone on Earth knew the face of the Mentor Presumptive.

"You have asked me many questions." Gilden tried for the hundredth time to fathom the unreadable, the expression on the Teller's face.

"That is my function."

"I would like to ask you one."

"That is your privilege."

"Why are you a Teller? You seem a sincere woman, and a friendly one. Why do you pursue a profession that forces you to inflict torture and death?"

The silence in the room lasted less than a second for Gilden. He knew that for the Teller, with total control over her time rate and his, the interval might be minutes or hours—long enough to consider the answer in detail, and match it to the Telling process.

She was shaking her head. "I have no answer to that question. I do what I do."

"And I do what I do. I cannot explain, but I can tell." Arrin Gilden's eyes fixed on the Teller as he tried to see within himself. "I do not know why. I know that I had no choice. I could not help myself. I was *compelled* to observe, to find a way to observe. I believe I was good at it."

"From everything that I have been able to discover, you are the best. Certainly the best in the records of the Empyrium." The lights brightened and yellowed. The chair with its wrist and ankle cuffs became a soft couch. The brace at Gilden's head vanished.

"Real reality." The Teller's voice dropped half an octave. Gilden found himself facing a dark-haired, smooth-faced woman not much older than his own twenty-five years.

"When you stop explaining, and just tell, it makes things so much easier."

"How do you know when I am telling?"

"I cannot force truth. But I can detect lies. Perhaps that is why I am a Teller." She came across to sit next to Gilden on the couch. "And sometimes—very rarely—I can offer an alternative to eternal agony. This is such a time. You must leave Earth, and go to Lucidar."

She gazed at him with calm blue eyes. Gilden found himself unable to remember their color as it had been in that other reality.

She smiled. The Teller had even white teeth, a mouth slightly asymmetrical, the left side higher than the right. "I am sure that I am not the first person to suggest that you are a mental cripple, a person who might have been helped in his youth but who is now incorrigible. Your role as voyeur is the most important thing in your life. That is a statement, not a question."

"It is not a statement. It is an understatement." Gilden breathed deep and again looked inward. "Voyeurism is the *only* important thing in my life."

"Even so, you should have treatment. But not until your return to Earth—assuming, of course, that you do return."

"Treatment? Not torment?"

"Perhaps. You will go to Lucidar on official business of the Mentor. If you succeed at that, you will be pardoned upon your return. A man of your outstanding skills, suitably channeled and monitored, has much to offer the Empyrium. If you fail, you will serve your original sentence, strong agony until your final breath. The Mentor offers inducement to succeed."

"I don't understand what I am being asked to do."

"Of course. It has not been explained, and it is not my position to do that. I am merely empowered to make the offer. Let me say only this: it is a difficult task, but one for which I believe you are supremely well suited. From your point of view, events far from Earth have provided a happy accident of timing. Your unique services are required on the rebel world of Lucidar."

"I have no decision to make. It is either leave here for an unknown purpose, or suffer torture until I die."

"Bravo, Gilden! At last you comprehend, and state things exactly. We are agreed then, you are going?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then I have but one more official duty." The Teller reached out. Again she was holding a stubby cylinder with a flat end. When she pressed it against Gilden's upper arm the grooved disk flared white-hot. Gilden roared with pain and jerked away.

"No derived reality this time. Look at that brand often, Gilden, as a reminder for you to do your best. That pain was a pale shadow of what awaits you on your return if you fail. And the next time you will not be able to pull yourself away."

Gilden rocked to and fro with tears in his eyes. The skin had been seared off his arm in a circle as big as the palm of his hand. His nostrils were full of the stink of burnt flesh and hair. But he had seen the rapturous look on the Teller's face as she pressed that fiery circle into his tender skin.

He knew, even if she did not, why she would never give up her position as Teller.

The Mentor was absolute ruler of Earth. The idea that there were places on the Linkworlds where intelligent beings lived beyond the Mentor's control, that many of those creatures were not human in any way—it was a revelation to Arrin Gilden. He wondered if this was just another derived reality.

For surely this was not the real world. Surely he would emerge to something more plausible. He was supposed to be in space, but there was no sign of the familiar stars of Earth. Instead a bubbling lava, dull-red and chaotic and flecked with orange sparks, stood outside every port of the sealed ship. A faint churning and trembling inside Gilden matched the seething exterior. Two more days of flight through this fiery maelstrom of non-space, and according to his shipboard companions they would emerge in the Lucidar system. He would meet the representatives of the alien Sigil. And his work would begin.

Or was it all a dream? The woman across the table from him, the only female on the ship, seemed absolutely real and solid. But was she? Or was he still in the interrogation chamber, awaiting the Teller's next question?

Derli Margrave was fair-haired, small-boned, and delicately built. Her eyes seemed too pale and piercing for an Earth native. She sought Gilden's company, as much as her partner (husband? mate? brother?) Valmar Krieg seemed to avoid it. The first few meetings with her had made Gilden profoundly uneasy. His adult intimate encounters with women had numbered in the hundreds but they had been one-sided. A voyeur was not required to endure scrutiny as well as observing, to make conversation as well as listening. A voyeur did not have to worry about his own appearance, about the impression that he was making on another.

By his fifth meeting with Derli, his feelings had changed. She was deliberately seeking his company. Her appearance at his side whenever he happened to enter the communal recreation area was too unfailing to be an accident. But when she was with him she made no demands. If he gave any hint that he did not choose to talk, she remained quiet. If he wanted to speak, she listened to his every word. She groomed her hair and face in his presence unselfconsciously, aware of but not displeased by his close attention. And she did not, like the women of his childhood and youth, dismiss, dominate, scorn, or command him. The one tender incident of infancy, when as he watched unnoticed a woman had given birth and held the tiny baby to her naked breast, was more dream than memory. But that woman had been like Derli, small, fair, and gentle.

She was talking now, answering his questions at the same time as she braided her long amber hair.

"You think you don't know much about the Sigil, but actually you know almost as much as anyone. Their exploration ship appeared in orbit around Lucidar only two months ago, and they landed a few days later. Just two of them. That's apparently the way they prefer to travel. The world of the Sigil, wherever it is, seems to be far off toward the center of the Galaxy. This couple are way outside the usual Sigil territory."

"Then why are we so interested in them?"

Derli paused, peering quizzically into the mirror at Gilden past a thick twisted lock of fair hair. "Define 'we.' I am a biologist, naturally I'd like to know the Sigil physiology—something that so far has been completely denied to us. They keep to themselves, stay in their ship most of the time, avoid all direct physical contact."

"What about Valmar? Is he a biologist, too?"

"He is, but that's not why he's here. Lucidar is a rebel world, close to breaking point with Earth. Valmar is one of the Mentor's most trusted advisors. The Mentor wants to know if there is anything else going on with the Sigil—are they what they claim to be, simple explorers? Or are they something else, part of a subversion that the Mentor needs to worry about? Valmar is convinced that they are hiding something."

"From what you say they seem to be hiding everything."

Derli was applying a smooth coat of cream to an area below her right cheekbone. Gilden noticed a slight discoloration.

"It's nothing." Somehow she still had one eye on him. "It will be gone in a day or two. You're right, though, the Sigil do seem to hide everything now. They were not like that when they first made contact. But that's where you come in. It should be a real challenge."

"They never leave their ship?"

"Briefly, for special occasions. But they have to wear suits. No one has been able to obtain a tissue sample—not even a flake of skin. And naturally their ship remains totally sealed all the time, to hold its atmosphere." She inspected herself in the all-around mirror, then to Gilden's disappointment stood up. "I have to go. Valmar will be waiting for me."

Gilden stood up too, on the brink of a question: Is Valmar Krieg your husband, or your lover? He did not ask it, but waited until she was gone and the last trace of the perfume that she wore had been sucked away by the room's air purifiers.

Then he went to his own quarters. Most of his specialized voyeur equipment was stowed away, inaccessible until the arrival on Lucidar. But what he carried with him in his personal luggage should suffice for such a simple job.

Gilden told himself that it was necessary work. In another two days his skills would be taxed to their limit. He could not afford to be out of practice.

Valmar Krieg was long-limbed and powerful, with a jutting red beard and golden-red hair over his whole body. He proved to be aggressively sexual, a brutal stallion of a lover who obviously hurt Derli and took no notice of her discomfort. She endured the violence of his passion without a murmur. When he was finished she stroked his body, fondling him and holding him in her arms, seemingly taking her own pleasure from his sated stillness. Only after he was asleep and quietly snoring did she ease away from him to examine the bruises on her neck, arms, and tender thighs.

Gilden watched everything in total absorption. And misery. For the first time in his life he had observed a sexual encounter in which he knew and *liked* the woman. It changed everything. He had experienced no vicarious thrill. Instead he had shared the pain felt by Derli. His only pleasure had come in observing her afterward, when she explored and tended to herself. And then it had been an impossible transference, Gilden's virginal self becoming explorer and gentle nurse of Derli's abused body.

He felt that he could not bear to meet her again, nor to act as voyeur for her lovemaking. But the urge to do so grew on him steadily for the next day and a half. He was almost relieved when it was Valmar Krieg rather than Derli who sought him out.

"Been enjoying yourself?" Krieg's self-confidence matched his physical presence. He sat down at the table opposite Gilden. "Come on, man, don't act innocent. You've been watching Derli and me."

Denial was the immediate reaction. But it was over-ridden by another concern.

"How did you detect the presence of the voyeur? No one else has ever managed to do that."

"Relax. I didn't. One of my jobs is to keep an eye on you. I reviewed all your records back on Earth, and I've seen you ogling Derli. You have no work to do until we get to Lucidar. Put all those together, you had to be watching us. I don't mind."

"Derli—"

"Doesn't know. And doesn't care right now. She's sick." Krieg laughed at Gilden's expression. "Oh, nothing to get excited about. Space doesn't agree with her, makes her want to throw up. But I didn't come here to talk about her. I came to talk about you."

"You saw my records. You know all about me."

"I do. But I don't think you do. I don't think you understand what you are."

"You think my records are wrong?"

"Not at all." Valmar Krieg leaned back and hooked his hands over one knee. "The records are fine. But everyone has missed their significance. Did you know that your pulse went from below sixty to way over a hundred when you invaded the Mentor Presumptive's bed-chamber?"

"The Teller informed me of that."

"Ah, but did she mention that the peak value, one hundred and thirty-eight, was attained *before the voyeur was in position?* By the time you were able to see the Presumptive and his bride, and the actual sex act began, your pulse rate was already dropping."

"I did not know that."

"I thought so. And the Teller could not interpret it. But I can." Valmar Krieg laughed again, with the dominant self-confidence that Arrin Gilden could never feel. "You see, man, you're no different from me. You're as big a stud as I am. It's just that you operate in a different area. Show you a protected, forbidden zone, like the Presumptive's bed-chamber, and it has all the challenge of a reluctant virgin. You can't rest until you've eased your way in past the barriers, broken down all her defenses, and she lies wide open and helpless before you. *That's* the exciting part. It's the penetration of *defenses* that gives you your kicks—not when she says yes, and the screwing starts."

Krieg stood up. "And you know what? You've got the time of your life waiting for you on Lucidar. Because according to what I'm hearing, the Sigil ship is hermetically sealed and totally impenetrable. The ultimate virgin." He slapped Gilden on the shoulder. "Rest up, swordsman, and conserve your testosterone. You're going to need it in another couple of days."

Derli had been wrong. Gilden's first meeting with the humans on Lucidar convinced him of that. They knew far more about the Sigil than anyone from Earth, and they had their own theories.

"Something changed." The man responsible for briefing the new arrivals had an unpronounceable Lucidar name, glottal stops and deep throat consonants spoken through a mouthful of gravel. "Something we told them, or maybe they told us. After the first two weeks we had a translation program that made sense most of the time. So we started to exchange information. We were doing fine, talking physics and linguistics and getting into biology and social structure and philosophy. Then one evening the two of them went off to their ship. Next morning they didn't come out. They've emerged only for short intervals ever since. And they will no longer swap information with us."

Gilden was nodding agreement, but he was having trouble absorbing information. Even without the alien Sigil, Lucidar provided an overload of strangeness. Gravity, sun, air, exotic flora and fauna. People. The gravel-voiced Bravtz'ig—the nearest that Gilden could come to his name—was tall and broad enough to have qualified as a giant on Earth, but here he didn't draw a second glance. It was tiny Derli and Gilden himself who would make the Lucidar freakshow.

Alien world, alien thoughts. He stared out of the window of the spaceport tower, to where the Sigil ship was visible as a far-off speck of iridescent green.

To penetrate its shields, of unknown nature and number, without leaving evidence of your presence. To plumb the impermeable hull's deepest secrets . . .

He forced his attention back to the conversation. Bravtz'ig was still talking. What had he just missed? Derli, sitting at his side, had a recorder. Was it running? He would need to review this meeting later.

She gave him a private smile and a raised eyebrow. She knew! Knew he had been observing her with the voyeurs. He was convinced of it. Valmar must have told her. And she didn't *mind*. He had a sudden voyeur flashback, a memory of Derli sitting naked and straight-legged on the bed. She was arching her back to reveal delicate pink-nippled breasts, then bending far over to massage overtaxed thigh muscles. Long amber tresses tumbled forward to hide her flat belly and pubic thatch. Had she done that deliberately, knowing he was watching?

Once again he had to fight his way back into the present. What was happening to him? It must be pure travel fatigue. For the past day and a half he had found himself unable to sleep, his head pulsing with thoughts of Valmar Krieg's prophecy about the challenge of the Sigil.

While he had been daydreaming, another of the Lucidar group had produced surround-videos of the Sigil couple, made not long after their original landing. Now their display was beginning.

Any single element of data about the aliens might be the crucial one. Gilden had seen videos of the two Sigil, but these were much more revealing. He studied them closely, knowing as he did so that he would review them again many, many times. The suits worn by the aliens concealed everything but broad general features. He could see that both Sigil were similar in morphology, bipedal and with bilateral symmetry. The legs were attached close to the middle of the forward-curving torso, and not far above them two long arms emerged at right angles to the body. The dark, hairless head formed a broad, forward-pointing cone on a thin neck and ended at the front in a prominent black muzzle.

There were certainly differences between them, but the main surprise was the disparity of sizes. One Sigil towered high over its smaller companion and was at least three times the bulk. Gilden assumed that the huge Sigil must be the female, because of the loving deference and exaggerated care with which it was treated by its diminutive partner. Then he thought of gentle Derli, and Valmar Krieg's indifferent brutality, and wondered if he had things exactly backward.

"Sexual dimorphism." Derli spoke softly, more to her recorder than to Gilden or anyone else. "A substantial size difference between the sexes. Common among certain arthropods and mammals with harems. However, analogy with existing Terran forms is more likely to be misleading then helpful. The presence of just one of each of the Sigil argues against multiple mates."

Bravtz'ig was speaking again. "The Sigil told us—when they were still telling us anything—that a ship always carries one of each. By the way, although they can both apparently talk the big one never does. All we've been told about them comes from the little one."

"What do you mean, when they were telling you anything?" Valmar had seemed half asleep. Now he was alert. "I thought they were still talking? If you have concealed information from the Mentor . . . "

"Relax, Master Krieg." Bravtz'ig laughed, and his expression was more aggressive than respectful. "We've not concealed a thing. Don't get wrapped around the bureaucracy."

Gilden had another revelation, one that again turned his world upside down. The Mentor was nominal ruler here, but Bravtz'ig clearly had no fear of him. No one on Lucidar was worried about being carried off for arbitrary Teller inquisition and eternal torment. And yet the Teller had seemed absolutely confident that Gilden, whether he succeeded or failed in his task with the Sigil, would return to Earth. How could she be sure?

The answer was obvious: red-bearded Valmar Krieg, trusted advisor to the Mentor, was Gilden's unstated guardian. He would be responsible for Gilden's return.

Bravtz'ig was continuing, and Gilden had to postpone his own worries: "The Sigil still talk to us, but there's been an enormous change since the first days of communication. We found out how their civilization is organized, and how their ship works, and that this is their first contact with our section of the Spiral Arm. But the real information stopped coming on the day they went into seclusion in their ship. They still come out now and again, but we get what my boss calls party chat—they tell us trivia."

"Maybe they received instructions from their home world." Valmar Krieg had taken the Terran lead, even though Gilden was the one who was supposed to solve the problem of the Sigil.

"If they did, they must be far beyond us in communications technology. We've been monitoring their ship with everything we've got. No sign of an outgoing signal."

"Any theories for what happened?"

"Bunches. But they all boil down to one of two ideas: either they learned something about us that they didn't like, or they're afraid we'll learn something about *them* that they don't want us to know."

"So why don't they just up and leave?"

"We've been afraid they will. We've deliberately kept dribbling them useful information, bit by bit—a lot more than they've given us recently. But we soon realized we needed expert help." Bravtz'ig nodded to Gilden. "If you can get an observation instrument into their ship, you'll be a Lucidar hero no matter what you did on Earth."

"I'll need help, too." It was close to noon, and Lucidar shimmered with heat haze. The speck of iridescent green danced tantalizingly on the horizon. A matching tingle of anticipation shivered within Gilden. "First, I'll need everything you have about their ship."

"You'll get that. But I don't think you'll be happy. They're closed tight. We measure zero material exchange with our atmosphere, no transparent materials, and no emergent radiation." Bravtz'ig glanced at Derli. "What about you? What do you need?"

"I'll be as dependent on Gilden as you are. I can determine a little biology from external appearance, but with an alien species it's not very reliable. Their suits are a problem. I need X-rays, sonargrams, tissue samples." She turned from Bravtz'ig to Gilden. "Unless you can get me those, Arrin, I can't really begin."

The easy things had to be done first. Even if there was only one chance in a million that they might succeed, Gilden could not afford to overlook the obvious. He also could not assume that Bravtz'ig's team was as painfully thorough as he had to be.

The Sigil ship sat on six splayed green legs in the middle of the open plain of the landing field. It was, as Bravtz'ig had warned him, sealed against matter gain or loss. Not a molecule from Lucidar went into the rounded hull, and none escaped. That eliminated the use of every material voyeur device in Gilden's arsenal.

Which left only radiation, in its various forms. It was not the first time that he had faced such a problem. Gilden, from the mobile experiment station provided by Bravtz'ig, set out to observe the Sigil ship using every wavelength from hard gamma to long radio.

Nothing.

He took a more active step and bathed the ship with monochromatic radiation generated from his own sources. The return signals at every frequency were quite featureless. No radiation penetrated more than a millimeter into the shining surface. Not in the ultra-violet, not in the visible, not in the reflective or emissive infra-red. He went doggedly on, creeping through the spectrum from shortest to longest wavelengths.

Again, nothing.

At last, when the sun was setting, Gilden abandoned his experiments in favor of pure thought. Sometimes, a negative result could be as significant as a positive one. One fact nagged at him: there was no anomalous thermal signature, no elevation of ship hull temperature above ambient. How could that be? If the Sigil ship was in exact temperature balance with the atmosphere, where did the heat go that was generated in the interior?

He was not able to answer that question, but it was an important one. Surely the Sigil, no matter how advanced their science, could not evade the laws of thermodynamics. Even if all power devices were turned off inside the hull, any living organism had to eat. Eating implied energy conversion from one form to another. Heat production was an inevitable by-product.

Gilden's neck ached, and his closed eyes saw nothing but the red after-images of dials and monitors. His head was suddenly buzzing with a swirl of speculation and unanswered questions. He filed his observations and went back to the living quarters that Bravtz'ig had assigned to the visitors.

On the way in he stopped at the bath-house to bathe his weary eyes. Derli was there, leaning against a wash-basin. He nodded to her, but only after he had laved his face and dried it on a hand towel did he notice her stooped posture.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Her smile was forced, her lips pale.

"There is." He stepped closer. "You look awful."

"I'm just a bit sick, still."

"I thought that was space nausea, and you were over it."

"I thought so, too." She leaned forward to rest her forehead against the cool grey metal of the wash-basin. "Guess a new planet can do it just as well. Unfamiliar air, food, gravity."

"I'm sorry. I'm working as fast as I can, but it's slow going. The ship's really impenetrable. Maybe you should return to Earth and come back here when I find some information you can use."

"*No!*" Derli straightened her back. "Leaving is the last thing I want to do. I don't feel good, but I love this place. I'll stay on Lucidar until I'm forced to leave." She took a deep breath, and reached up to touch Gilden's cheek. "But thanks for the thoughtfulness. I'm not used to that. Maybe we can talk later, when I feel better."

She walked unsteadily out, leaving Arrin Gilden with something new to ponder. *Until I'm forced to leave.* He had assumed that as Valmar

Krieg's partner, Derli Margrave was one of those who made the rules. But it seemed she was no more free to choose than Gilden himself. Derli's domination extended beyond sexual possession.

Gilden touched his cheek, and admitted for the first time his full resentment—hatred?—of Valmar Krieg.

Gilden stayed in his quarters for the whole evening, his thoughts sliding uneasily from one subject to another. The Sigil, Valmar, the Teller, Derli. She did not come, although his voyeurs told him that she was alone. Valmar Krieg was far away, meeting with Bravtz'ig. The Sigil were locked tight within their ship.

Finally Gilden took the unprecedented step, walking the twenty steps from his room to Derli's.

She was looking better, leaning back on a broad divan covered with a beige cloth that complemented the color of her hair. Gilden realized that his voyeurs needed to be slightly re-calibrated. On their imagers the hair and divan had not quite matched.

"I wondered if you would come. I was going to give you another half-hour." She patted the seat beside her. "I thought you might be afraid of Valmar."

I was going to give you another half-hour. And then what?

"I am." Gilden remained standing. "I mean, I am afraid of him."

"You came anyway."

"He's miles away."

"I see." Derli gave a little shrug. "I guess you would know, Arrin, if anyone would. No point in taking a risk, is there?"

The tone was a criticism, far more than the words. Gilden sat down at her side. "I told you earlier that I was making slow progress. But that's not true anymore. I think I know a way into the Sigil ship—not with an actual voyeur, nothing as direct as that. But a way to send in a probe signal."

"You told me earlier that the ship was impenetrable."

"The hull is. But I realized that there had to be some way to get rid of generated internal heat. It's going out through the ship's support legs, diffused deep into the surface of Lucidar itself."

"And you can get a probe in the same way?"

"Nothing material. But I can send in my own signals that way, use high-frequency modulated phonons—ultrasonic packets—if I have to."

"It sounds difficult."

"I've done it before. Give me a few days."

"I'm a patient woman." She turned to face him. "You came here to tell me that?"

"Yes." It was a lie. The Teller would have picked it up at once. "And to ask you something."

"Ah!" Derli leaned far back on the divan. "That's more like it. Ask me, Arrin. I'm waiting."

"You say that you love Lucidar, and hate the idea of leaving it. But you are not a condemned criminal, like me. What's to stop you staying here after the work on the Sigil is over?"

"You don't know?" She abandoned her languorous pose and sat straight up. "You really don't?"

"If I knew, I would not ask."

"Lean toward me, and give me your hand."

Gilden did so, and allowed her to guide his hand to a place on her head just behind where the thick amber hair was parted.

"Feel that?" She set his index finger on a spot where the skin of the skull was slightly rough. "That's scar tissue, over the implant. Valmar knows the code. If I refuse to return to Earth or do something disloyal to the Mentor, he will activate it."

Gilden was still touching her head, feeling the delicate bones of the skull. "What would it do?"

"I don't know. I'm not supposed to know. Uncertainty is part of the control. Maybe the top of my head would be blown off. Maybe I'd be in permanent agony. Maybe I'd just become a drooling idiot or a nymphomaniac for the rest of my life. I've seen all those and worse." She took Gilden's hand in hers, and again guided it. This time to a place on his own skull. "You, too, Arrin. Anyone gets it who leaves Earth and works directly for the Mentor."

"Even Valmar?" Gilden fingered with awful fascination the unnoticed small patch of scar tissue on his own head.

"Of course. Lucidar might subvert him, too. The difference is, Valmar controls you and me, but some other person controls him."

"He *owns* us!"

"Not all of us, Arrin. Some of our actions are our own." Derli was pulling him toward her, at the same time as she sank back on the divan. Gilden struggled free of her arms, stood up, and stared down at her. He was trembling.

"You don't want me?" A smile would have made it intolerable. But Derli looked hurt and sorrowful, like an abandoned child. Gilden groaned, turned, and blundered out of the room and the building, out into the evening gusts of Lucidar's spring. He walked blindly and randomly, hardly aware of time or direction until increasing cold drove him home.

Back in his own quarters, he activated a voyeur. Derli was still sitting on the divan. Somehow she knew. She stared right at the minute observation instrument and raised her hand in a wave.

This time she was smiling, but Gilden saw no reproach or scorn on her face; only an understanding that for him some things were still impossible.

He waved back, knowing that she could not see him. And then he settled down to work. He had an additional task now, as difficult in its way as the problem of the Sigil—and far more dangerous. There was one place where no sane voyeur would ever dare to look. In this case, Gilden had no choice.

He worked until close to dawn at a level of intensity that approached a trance. When he finally collapsed into bed the new problem ran on inside his head, distorted and paradoxical. And when Valmar Krieg marched into his bedroom early the next morning, Gilden saw his arrival as part of another cloudy dream sequence.

"Derli says you've cracked it." Valmar sat down uninvited on the end of the bed.

The words sent Gilden's heart into a mad race. Then he realized that the other man couldn't possibly know what he had worked on through the night. Because Derli herself didn't know. Krieg had to be talking about the Sigil and their ship.

"I haven't cracked it. But I do have ideas."

"Tell me." Krieg held up his hand. "Don't get the wrong impression. It's not that I feel I can't trust you, but I have to file my own status reports. I must know what you're doing, at least in outline. How will you get your voyeurs into the Sigil ship?"

"I won't. It's utterly impenetrable for solid objects without alerting the Sigil." Thinking about technical questions calmed Gilden at once.

"So how can you learn what's inside?"

"That's a different problem. We can be fairly sure that the Sigil ship has its own internal monitoring system, probably with imaging components just the way that our ships do. So I don't need to get my own voyeurs inside—I just have to control the Sigil's own monitors. Then I have to get that information out."

"It sounds impossible."

"I've done it half a dozen times, back on Earth. The trick is to find an access point. That's what I think I have. The Sigil ship is getting rid of excess heat down into the planetary surface. So I have an avenue. I can send pulses in by the same route and read their returns. After that it means lots of data analysis, none of it automatic. But I'm comfortable with that. The part I'm less sure of is my interaction with the Sigil ship's computer systems. I have to plant my own code in there, hidden in a way that can't be noticed, before I can control the ship's monitors."

Krieg was thoughtfully stroking his red beard. "That doesn't sound so hard. Logic is logic, universal."

"Maybe suspicion is, too. If the Sigil have enough triggers built in against interference they'll spot me before I'm hardly started."

"So the sooner we know that, the better. Out of bed, and get to work. You weren't brought all this way for a vacation." But Valmar Krieg's nod was one of satisfaction as he strode out.

More sleep would be impossible anyway. Gilden, muzzy-headed, forced himself to take a hot and cold shower, and then to eat a full breakfast before he set to work.

He had over-simplified the problem for Valmar Krieg to the point of imbecility, and at the same time deliberately made its solution sound more difficult. Gilden didn't want anyone, most especially Krieg, aware of the sophistication of the tools he had developed over the past ten years. And no one must suspect that during the following days of intense dawn-to-midnight effort Gilden would be feeling his way through not one mental maze, but two.

Derli found him on the afternoon of the tenth day, asleep in the dining area. His head rested on the hard table, he was snoring, and in front of him sat a cold and untouched plate of food.

She took a seat cushion and eased it under his gaunt cheek. She did it as gently as possible but the disturbance awoke him. He stared at her, bleary-eyed.

"Mmph. What time is it?"

"Four hours after noon. You look terrible. Why don't you go to bed and get some real sleep?"

"I was going to. As soon as I'd eaten. I was coming to see you. To show you." He was mumbling, still hardly awake, working his jaw from side to side and turning his head to ease the muscles of his stiffened neck. "I don't have all you need. Look for more as soon as I'm rested. But I have something."

"You're inside the Sigil ship?"

"Five days ago. Not too hard. Difficult part is time-sharing the monitors. So our observations won't be noticed. And then getting information out." Gilden stood up, leaning against Derli for balance. "Come on, if you want to see it. Krieg, too."

"He's not here. He flew to Montmorin for a meeting with a Lucidar group. I think there's a big fight brewing with Earth. He'll be back tomorrow."

"Mm." Gilden barely seemed interested, leading the way into his own living quarters. "Doesn't matter. Unless you need him."

"For my work? I don't. Valmar started out as a biologist, but he hasn't done any real research or analysis for years. I don't need him."

Gilden grunted. He was already at work, setting up a linked series of displays. "Take a look at this first. It's just a summary, an overview of what we've got. When you see what's here and what's missing, you can tell me where I should concentrate my efforts tomorrow." He stood up and gestured to his seat.

"What about you?" But Derli sat down. The temptation was too great. A first image was already forming on the screen, of what could be an interior chamber of the Sigil ship.

"I'm going to take a shower while you do a run-through. You don't need me for that—probably manage better without me."

She said nothing. Gilden knew why. He had developed the displays slowly and painfully, over days of frustrating effort, but even that had been fascinating. For Derli the impact would be a thousand times as great.

He stood staring at her in silence for a couple of minutes. Then he retreated quietly to the bath-house. Derli did not even notice his departure.

Progress was slow, but finally overwhelming. For the first couple of minutes of display Derli saw only blurry green outlines of two Sigil, moving jerkily from place to place. Frequent incomprehensible breaks or swirls of random color provided a maddening distraction, as did passing glimpses of what seemed to be chamber ceilings and floors.

But then, as Gilden's mastery of the interaction technique had slowly deepened, the recorded images improved in focus, depth, color, and detail. Derli could discern odd features of the Sigil ship interior. The chamber walls had a convoluted, organic look to them, unlike anything constructed by humans. Even the control banks lacked clean, hard, functional outlines. She waited, impatient but understanding. Her interest was in the biology of the Sigil but she was not the only customer for Gilden's magic. Others cared to know about the ship, not its occupants.

Finally, as though responding to Derli's impatience, the display settled down to show the Sigil themselves. Derli leaned forward. They were not wearing the suits that had cloaked every record in the Lucidar data banks. She confirmed overall structure. Both Sigil were certainly bipedal, with bilateral symmetry. Now that she could see their external colors, she learned that the legs and arms springing from the forward-curving torso were a bright orange-red. The trunk was banded, in crimson and white for the smaller Sigil and in darker red and white for the other. Only the head of each was dark. The prominent muzzles, almost black, were ciliated with delicate silver tendrils like the feelers on a catfish.

Derli watched the display through to its last incomplete image. Then she backed up to the beginning, longing for more: more details of the mouth, especially its inside; more and higher-resolution images of the lower part of the trunk where the reproductive and excretory organs were logically housed; X-rays, to reveal internal structure; most of all, tissue samples.

She began to make a list, even though she knew that the last two elements would almost certainly be denied to her regardless of Gilden's skill. Ship monitoring systems used X-rays routinely for status reports on the drive and X-rays also served a purpose with living organisms. But that was in diagnosis of abnormal conditions, not during routine survey of the ship's interior.

As for tissue samples, Gilden had already assured her that he could return no material object, however small, from the inside of the ship. But he had performed other miracles. As the record progressed from beginning to end the Sigil became smoothly moving three-dimensional objects rather than flat, jerky cartoons.

Derli stopped wishing for what she did not have, and concentrated her attention on the similarities and differences between the two Sigil. She moved to the appropriate part of the file.

She knew from the original records provided by Bravtz'ig that the smaller alien was about one and a half meters tall, the big one maybe three meters. Such a large size imposed structural limitations on any form evolved on a planet with gravity comparable with Earth or Lucidar. Gilden's new data confirmed it. The large Sigil was bigger in every way, thicker, clumsier, more slow-moving. The small one danced anxiously around it, bringing food and drink, adjusting cushions, apparently catering to its partner's every demand. Structurally, both of them possessed a generally similar body pattern except for variations of the lower trunk. That suggested the varying genital configurations appropriate to male and female. The color differences of the torso were also presumably sex-linked, brighter crimson bands fitting the display pattern of the smaller male.

It was all plausible and consistent. But something, somewhere, did not quite fit.

What?

She leaned back in her seat, placed interlocked hands on the back of her head, and pondered.

Derli had frozen the display at a certain point, concentrating on a smooth boss at the base of the male Sigil's torso, when she heard a noise behind her. It was Gilden, his hair dark and wet and slicked down across his forehead. He was paler than ever, but far more alert.

"Is this everything?" Derli nodded to the display.

"Everything I thought you'd need to see. I have hours and hours of other records, about the ship itself and its computer system."

"I think I should see them all. Just in case." She pointed to her own notes. "And here's my wish list. Without cell samples I'm reduced to guessing on things as basic as sex. Maybe you can work out some way to provide me with a substitute for that information."

"I can try." Gilden stared at the display. "You're still in the middle sequence after all this time. Or did you go all the way through?"

"Twice." She frowned up at him, then glanced across to the general display board. "Phew. I've been sitting here over three hours. Unbelievable. I thought you were just going for a shower."

"I was. I took a nap first." He hesitated. "Want to eat? I don't remember when I last had a full meal." And, when she seemed slow to answer, "We can talk about the rest of the data you need. Don't know if I'll be able to get it. But I'll try. Just tell me what you want."

He was too nervous. His jittery movements reminded Derli of the anxious male Sigil (if it was the male) hovering over its hulking partner. She stood up. "All right. I'm hungry, too. And we don't have to discuss my problem. We can talk about anything you like." She took Gilden by the arm.

A mistake. He flinched away from her touch. He would not look at her as they walked together to the dining area, and he stared up at the ceiling while Derli made food selections for both of them.

It was a chance too good to miss. She glanced at Gilden's tormented, too-pale face, and quietly added a mixture of tranquilizers and stimulants to the drinks that she was ordering. He did not notice, even when they sat down and he took the first sip. He was staring at her when the food was served, but never into her eyes. He was studying her mouth, nose, and ears, as intently as a portrait artist.

The drugs were slow to take effect. They ate a full three-course meal, while Derli discussed Sigil physiology in as much detail as she was able, including her need for high-resolution body images, and Gilden remained silent. But at last, when the plates were cleared and a third drink had been served and drunk, he met her eyes and said, "You like it here. You don't have to go back to Earth if you don't want to."

"I told you, Valmar knows the code of my implant as well as yours. He can make us do what he likes. Kill us both, if he has the codes set that way."

"He might kill me, but surely he wouldn't kill you. He wouldn't set your implant that way. You are his lover."

"More than that. And less than that." Derli laughed and reached out to stroke Gilden's hand where it sat palm-down on the table, realizing as she did so that the drugs were affecting her as much as him. "He loves me, he loves me not. Arrin, I don't know what Valmar would do if I said I was staying on Lucidar. But I know I dare not take *that* risk. Other risks, I want to take."

All the initiatives had to come from her. She had known it would be that way. He said nothing as they stood up from the table and she led him slowly back to her bedroom. He knew exactly how to undress her and touch her, as though he had done it before a thousand times. Yet at the same time he was clumsy and breathless, a boy fumbling his way toward a first encounter.

Derli understood. When the time came she moved on top of him and took the final initiative. And when he was too nervous and sudden, finished before she was even close, she understood that, too. She was part of the problem, unable to respond in full despite the drugs' assistance. In any case, there was more than one form of satisfaction.

When it was over he drifted off into sleep without a word. She lay beside him, studying the tight mouth and hollow cheeks. She leaned over and kissed the fading red circle of scar tissue on his muscular right arm. Physical union had changed everything. She had realized that it would—even counted on it. Now she had to tell him.

She patted his shoulder and his chest, not roughly but hard enough to bring him back to wakefulness. When his eyes opened she waited patiently until at last he turned to look at her.

"That was wonderful." But he did not look happy.

"Yes."

"But not for you."

"That was my fault." There was no point in her putting it off. "I couldn't get into the right mood, because of what I kept thinking."

"About the Sigil?"

"*No*. Damn the Sigil." The residual effect of the drugs made her want to giggle when there was nothing funny. "I kept thinking about you, and about Valmar. And my condition."

It was as bad as she had feared. He was staring at her in mystification. She would have to spell out everything for him.

"You knew I was throwing up on the ship coming here. And you knew I was sick when I got here. Wasn't it obvious to you that I was pregnant? Pregnant with Valmar's child."

He gazed at her with no expression that she could read. "He forced himself on you, made you do whatever he wanted?"

So easy, to agree to that lie. Derli sighed. "No. I was quite willing. I can say now that I wish I hadn't done it, but I did."

He sat up and laid his hand gently on her bare belly. “Are you telling me that you are pregnant now? That there’s a baby in here?”

“Yes. I’m at nearly two and a half months. I hope the morning sickness is all finished.”

“Good.”

He turned toward her, and she saw the last thing that she had expected. He was physically aroused.

All the tension in her body melted away. She lay back and closed her eyes. “The second time will be much better, Arrin, I promise you—for both of us.”

The first love-making with Derli had been agony for Gilden of an unusual and terrible kind. He liked her, more than he had ever liked any woman; but when she moved above him and took control of his body she became all the Harpies of childhood, playing with him, mocking him, tormenting him, using him for their own ends without any regard for his needs or wants.

His body had brought him rapidly to a climax, divorced from his anguish, and he had pretended to a satisfaction he did not feel. As he drifted toward sleep he was convinced that this was the only form of physical sexual experience he could ever know.

But then Derli had spoken of her pregnancy. That both soothed and excited him. His mind pictured her again with Valmar; and he had an answer.

He distanced himself mentally from their new union, even as he moved on top of her and entered her waiting body. Once again he became the voyeur, the involved but remote participant. The difference was that he functioned now as both observer and player, embarked on a dizzying self-referential exercise that sent him spinning down an endless regression of sexual congress. He was watcher and actor. He knew the right moves, he had seen them a thousand times over. And when his climax arrived, moments after hers, his dual selves coalesced with a force as painful as torture. His shudders were both physical and mental; this time they signaled a pleasure almost too much to bear.

It was Derli who drifted off to sleep, while Gilden lay wide awake and tried to understand what had just happened. In the dim overhead lights he studied her body. She lay flat, legs still spread wide. She was breathing slowly and her mouth was slightly open. She would probably not wake until morning.

It occurred to him that he might never have a better opportunity. He also realized that his workload had just increased again.

He had to create yet another voyeur, of unmatched sensitivity and operating lifetime.

She did not move as he leaned over to plant a delicate moth's kiss on her navel, dressed in silence, and left the bedroom.

Derli had said what information she needed. She had not suggested any way to obtain it. As soon as Valmar Krieg returned from Montmorin, Gilden moved his base of operations into the mobile experiment station next to the Sigil ship and went into round-the-clock surveillance.

He was trying to be cautious, but he suspected that he was pushing the limit. It would require minimal effort by one of the Sigil to learn that their privacy had been violated and the computer system subverted.

He began to confine his intrusion into the ship to microscopic time slices, just enough for a spot check of events. It was during one of these flashes, occurring close to the middle of the Lucidar night, that the crucial event began.

Gilden came fully awake. The ship's monitors were showing him the Sigil sleeping area. He had caught a glimpse of the big one crouched on the floor. Above it hovered the small one, clinging on to its partner's body with all its limbs.

If there was ever a time to take risks, this was it. Gilden set the ship's computer to provide and export to him continuous observations.

The massive body of the lower Sigil was wriggling uneasily as though she was not satisfied with her position. The smaller one clung on resolutely. A long, tapered member was emerging slowly from the rounded boss on the front lower part of its body. The new organ was pale yellow, glistening, and slightly corrugated along its upper side, as though another ribbed tube ran along it. After a preliminary probing the member's pointed tip stabbed into an invisible entry point in the rounded bulk of the other's lower back. The restless movement of the female ceased at once. The Sigil pair became motionless except for a steady pulsing within the thin pipe that coupled them. Waves of contraction passed along it, running in ripples from male to female.

The act went on for nearly forty minutes, until a shudder racked the whole body of the upper Sigil. As soon as the long spasm was over the creature began to withdraw and loosen its hold. The lower partner did not react to the de-coupling. Its splayed body remained immobile, apparently asleep on the floor of the chamber.

Gilden had been lost in the scene that came to him through the monitors. He was dismayed when he finally thought to glance at the time. He had obtained exactly what Derli had asked for—but at a price. It was hard to believe that an intrusion of such duration and intensity would not raise alarms within the ship's security systems. Now that he checked he saw that for the past fifteen minutes there had been a flurry of activity on the ship's computer. Introspection routines that he had never before encountered were coming into operation.

An unfamiliar signal sounded through the ship's interior. The smaller Sigil, all its lethargy gone, came scuttling across to inspect the contoured control bank.

Gilden cut off interaction with the ship, made extra copies of the new records, and hurried with them toward Derli's apartment. Even though it was the middle of the night she would want to see what he had found.

He entered her bedroom reluctantly, afraid that he would find Valmar Krieg with her. But she was sleeping alone, covered to the neck by a thin sheet. When he woke her she sat up, sighed, and put her arms around him.

"No." Gilden resisted as she tried to draw him down beside her. "It's not that. Please."

She released him at once and pulled the sheet up to cover her body. "You've been avoiding me. Hiding from me."

"Not true. I've been working, all the time—to get you this." Gilden held out a copy of the new data record.

"What is it?" She dropped the sheet and reached out for the little box, ignoring, as Gilden could not, the bare shoulders and breasts that were revealed.

"The Sigil. Mating. The images show everything, with more body detail than anything I've given you earlier."

"Ooh! At last." She cupped her hands around the data block and held it to her chest. "Arrin, I must see this. Right now."

She scrambled out of bed and into shirt and shorts. Gilden fancied that he could see a slight additional swell in her belly.

He looked away. "I hope this gives you what you need. I went much too far to get it. I think the Sigil realize that we have been observing inside their ship."

Derli was hardly listening. Although she reached out to give him a token squeeze as she passed by, her attention was on the data block. She went to the waiting computer and inserted the new record. Gilden watched over her shoulder until the first frames of data appeared, showing the smaller Sigil clinging to the back of its partner. Then he went in search of Valmar Krieg.

He found the red-bearded guardian where he was supposed to be, in his assigned living quarters and bedroom. Krieg was not alone. Asleep at his side lay a huge Lucidar woman, blond, big-bosomed, and thick-limbed. Gilden thought at once of the Sigil, with its far larger partner.

"This had better be important." Either Krieg had been awake or he slept so lightly that he awoke at Gilden's first touch. "It's the middle of the goddamn night."

"I have new information about the Sigil. I passed a copy on to Derli Margrave."

"So what?" Valmar Krieg was sitting up while the woman at his side snored on. "Derli doesn't need me to help her analyze it. I can find out what it tells tomorrow."

"I suspect I went beyond prudence in obtaining the new information. The Sigil are aware that I have tapped their ship's monitors."

"That's another matter—and bad news for you if it's true." Krieg swung out of bed and moved toward the door, ignoring the sleeping woman. "You were supposed to operate *invisibly*, for God's sake. Not blunder around and announce your presence."

He went to the upper floor and stared out of the window. The Sigil ship was visible, sitting at the center of a permanent circle of lights.

Krieg grunted. "All quiet so far." But even as he spoke the ship began to lift, drifting upward from the smooth spaceport surface. As it rose higher its six support legs retracted into the iridescent green body. A few moments later the personal monitor at Krieg's belt called for attention.

"Emergency!" It was Bravtz'ig, by the sound of his gravel voice still three-quarters asleep. "You there, Krieg? We just received a Sigil departure flight alert. Their ship is moving out."

"This is Krieg. I'm watching it happen. What can we do about it?"

"Not a damn thing—unless you want to tell me to try and stop it."

"How would you do that?"

"Good question. Destroy the ship, that's the only way I know. And I can tell you now, our space command would refuse to do that even if you ordered it."

"So I won't waste time trying. Can you follow their path?"

"Until they go to subspace. Then we've lost them. You know that as well as I do." Bravtz'ig's face appeared on the tiny screen, squinting and suspicious. "Did you *cause* this, Krieg, you and your cock-up Earth friends?"

"How could we? Follow their ship as far as you can. If we lose it we're all in trouble."

"You're in trouble anyway. Get off the line, Krieg, so I can talk to someone useful."

Bravtz'ig vanished. A moment later the unit went dead. Krieg turned to Gilden.

"I suggested we didn't cause this. But you *did* cause this, didn't you? You stupid asshole. It was the same on Earth. Your damned voyeur urges, you couldn't let go watching until it was too late. Now I have to go back and tell the Mentor that instead of learning more about the Sigil it was our party that drove them away from Lucidar. Come on." Krieg grabbed Gilden roughly by the arm and dragged him back down the stairs.

"Where are we going?"

"To collect Derli. With the Sigil gone our value on Lucidar is less than zero. We have to get out before this place blows up. Better be ready for pain, Gilden. The two of you will spend the next fifty years in purgatory."

"Derli had nothing to do with this."

"Don't kid yourself. You were screwing her, or more likely she was screwing you. Don't bother to deny it. She pushed you to get the data she wanted. Well, I hope she thinks it was worth it when she finds out what's coming to her."

"You can't hurt her." They were at the entrance to Derli's apartment. "She's pregnant—with your baby."

"I've got a hundred kids." Krieg did not even slow down. "All my women have 'em, I make sure of that. Wise up, Gilden, that's what they're for. One kid more or less means nothing."

The door was unlocked. Derli was still at the display. She turned when they entered but she hardly seemed to see them. The screen showed an enlarged view of the glistening yellow organ that coupled the small Sigil to its great partner.

"Arrin! Did you realize what you were seeing when you made this recording? We had it wrong, everything wrong."

"That doesn't matter now." Krieg released his hold on Gilden and went over to Derli Margrave. He switched off the computer and left a static display. "You can stop screwing around with all that. You and Gilden fucked up bigtime. The Sigil left, and now we're leaving. We're going to Earth."

Still it seemed as though Derli was not listening. The screen held her attention. Gilden came to stand between her and Krieg.

"She doesn't want to go back to Earth, can't you see that? She loves it here on Lucidar."

"She's going. So are you, dead or alive. Get out of my way."

"What happened on the Sigil ship was my fault." Gilden moved to put his arms around Derli. "You don't have to take her. Just take me."

"I'll do whatever I like. I'm taking both of you." Krieg was reaching for his belt. "Hands off her."

Derli at last noticed what Krieg was doing. She cried out in horror and tried to pull free of Gilden's hold. "Do what he says, Arrin—whatever he says."

"Take her advice, Gilden." Krieg's fingers were poised above his belt. "Do what I tell you. Last warning. Move!"

"I won't." Gilden tightened his embrace, holding Derli to him. "Try and make me. But I wouldn't if I were you."

"You bloody fool." Krieg's face was red with fury. "I've warned you, three times. You can't say you didn't ask for it."

He pressed a sequence of buttons along his belt.

There was a moment of total stillness, followed by an inhuman groan. It came from Valmar Krieg. He stood, unable to move. All the muscles of his body were contracting at once, tighter and tighter. Sinews and tendons snapped and popped, bones burst from their joints, arms and legs became shapeless bags of blood as veins and arteries ruptured. As he toppled forward the moan of expelled air from the tormented rictus of his mouth continued. But he was dead before his face smashed into the floor.

Gilden moved to stand by the body. "That's one question answered. I wondered what you had in store for me. Sorry, Krieg. I have to say you deserved it."

"You did that to him?" Derli Margrave had collapsed to her knees and was staring at Arrin Gilden's impassive face and Valmar Krieg's body with equal horror.

"I guess I did. He ought to have known better. Dammit, Derli, I'm a *voyeur*, and I'm the best there is. Krieg should have had more sense than to mess with me. Once you told me that coded sequences would activate implants in our skulls I had no choice. There's easy access through the nose and mouth. I sent voyeurs in to discover and erase the sequence from my implant. Yours, too."

"But what happened to Krieg?"

"I changed his coding to match the sequence that used to be in my implant." Gilden gestured to the shapeless hulk at his feet. "That would have been me, Derli. That's what he intended me to be. You, too, maybe."

He went across and lifted her to a standing position. "We're free now. Both of us. We can go where we like, do what we like."

Her eyes were empty. He was not getting through to her.

"Derli!" He shook her. "Snap out of it. If you want to stay on Lucidar without getting arrested we'll have to explain what happened to Krieg." And, when that warning produced no effect, "What's wrong with you? You were like this when we came in, before Krieg ever started in on you. What did you mean, we have everything wrong?"

The question broke her trance where shaking had failed. She began a shallow nod, almost fast enough to be a tremble.

"We did. We misunderstood everything. Now I know why the Sigil cut off contact with people here. I think I know why they left Lucidar—and if we send the right message, I think maybe they'll come back. I have to reach Bravtz'ig."

She started for the communication line, but Gilden stopped her.

"Bravtz'ig won't talk to us. Better if we go over there."

He led the way. Derli was talking non-stop behind him.

"I got off on the wrong foot during the very first meeting with Bravtz'ig. Sexual dimorphism, I said, to explain the size difference between the sexes. I also said that analogy with Earth forms could be misleading and dangerous, but I didn't listen to my own warning. When the records came in from their ship I found myself having trouble whenever I looked at the big Sigil and the small Sigil. To me, they *both* resembled females. But they weren't."

"Of course they weren't." Gilden had to pause to take his bearings. He had never been to Bravtz'ig's work area before in the dark. He turned slightly to the left and set off walking again. "We saw them mating."

"No, we didn't."

"You may not have—but I did. Their coupling is on the data block I just gave you!"

"I know. But you didn't see them mating. For one excellent reason: *the Sigil do not use sexual reproduction.* They are asexual animals. I suspect that they had never encountered sex in any form before they landed on Lucidar. That's what terrified them when they began to learn our biology. Sexual reproduction is such a terrific way of performing genetic variations, anything without it seems at a terrific evolutionary disadvantage. They're *scared* of our biology."

Gilden had to stop, even though it was only another forty or fifty yards to Bravtz'ig's office. "You don't understand, Derli. I don't know what was wrong with the data block that I gave you, but I *saw* them mating. In real time."

"No, you didn't. You just thought you did. There is a valid Earth analogy, but it's not the one that we've both been using. Did you ever hear of a Sphex wasp?"

"What have wasps to do—"

"Everything to do with this. A Sphex wasp is one species of the order of parasitic wasps. Its larvae eat grasshoppers. But the larvae don't catch them. The parent wasp does. She stings the grasshopper, enough to paralyze but not to kill. Then she lays her eggs inside it. They hatch and consume the host grasshopper from within. Some of the other parasitic wasps, ones that lay their eggs in caterpillars, are even trickier. The caterpillar is stung but it doesn't stay paralyzed. It recovers and goes on feeding. The wasp larva inside feeds on it, eating the caterpillar's organs in ascending order of importance so that the host stays alive as long as possible.

"That's the analogy for the Sigil. We are observing two different, asexual species. They look pretty much the same to us, but a grasshopper and a wasp probably look the same to aliens. The little one has evolved to prey on the larger—and carries it on long journeys, so that the smaller

one's young will have food. The yellow organ you saw isn't for transfer of sperm. It's a combined sting and ovipositor, to paralyze the big one and then lay eggs inside it."

Gilden recalled the wriggling Sigil, suddenly becoming still as the tapered member pierced its body. "But the big one is *intelligent*. It must realize very well what's being done to it."

"It surely does. But we can't begin to guess how it *feels*. Maybe it even believes itself privileged, to carry the offspring of a superior being. Like the old stories of mortals who bore the children of the gods."

Any horror that Derli might feel was overwhelmed by professional satisfaction. She seemed to experience none of Gilden's revulsion as she moved ahead, leading the way to Bravtz'ig's offices. "But we can go into details on this later," she said over her shoulder. "What we have to do right now is send a message after the Sigil ship, pointing out how asexual animals survive on Earth and Lucidar and compete very well with sexual forms. Of course, that message won't be necessary if the Sigil has simply gone off for solitude during the larval growth period. That's what lots of Earth creatures do. Then the ship may be back anyway in a month or two."

Gilden trailed after her. He was not listening. To experience as the climax of life's experience, not love but the exquisite pain of a wasp's sting. To be protected and cherished not as a companion, but as a living larder. To be consumed slowly and agonizingly from within. And above all else, to *know* your fate and comprehend exactly what was being done to you.

Somehow, the old torments threatened by the Teller seemed feeble and half-hearted.

The Sigil ship had not returned three weeks later when Gilden appeared one evening in Derli's living quarters. She was still hard at work. As Lucidar's expert on both the psychology of the Mentor and the biology of the Sigil, her services were constantly in demand.

She nodded to him. "Dinner? Sit down, Arrin. Ten minutes more and I'll stop."

"You don't need to stop." Gilden did not sit down, but began to pace back and forward behind her. "I didn't come to suggest dinner. I came to say I'm leaving."

"You have to go to Montmorin again?" She was focused on the screen in front of her.

"No. I'm leaving Lucidar."

"Didn't I tell you? We don't have to. Bravtz'ig says the Mentor daren't try a military move, and Lucidar would never agree to our extradition. We're quite safe here."

"It's not that. I came to say *goodbye*."

She froze, still staring at the screen. "You mean—you're leaving me?"

"Yes."

"I thought you . . . cared for me." She swung around. "No. I thought you *loved* me. That's what you've been telling me for the past few weeks."

"It was true. It *is* true."

"I see." Derli stared down, to her swelling belly. "I *see*. I've been a fool. I started a relationship with you when I had another man's child growing inside me. That was crazy. You can't put up with that, no man could."

He said nothing, and at last she went on, "It's the baby, isn't it? You can't stand the idea that I'm carrying Valmar Krieg's baby. But it's *my* baby, too. And you want me to get rid of it. You think, I could just go and have an abortion—"

"Stop it. Right there." Gilden halted in front of her. "I could agree with you, tell you that it's the baby. That's an easy out. But it wouldn't be true."

"Then what is it?" Derli could not hide her misery and confusion. "I know I've not had enough time for you, I've been so busy the past couple of weeks."

"It's not that I'm feeling neglected, either. I've been busy, too. And it's certainly not the baby. It's *me*. You tell me I'm cured, that everything is fine now. That I'm sexually normal—"

"More than normal. You are a wonderful lover."

"So you say. But Derli, inside my head I'm a *mess*. I dare not tell you what I think about when the two of us make love. I have to go away and try to sort myself out."

"But you'll come back?"

"I hope so."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Might you come back when the baby is born? I mean, you say it's not the baby . . . "

"One more time: *it's not the baby*."

"Because I haven't said anything to you, but I've been really worried. I came through a subspace trip when I was pregnant, which you're not supposed to do. Then when we got here there were the changes of air and food and gravity, and no one seems to know what effect that might have. Maybe it's going to be abnormal, maybe it will be deformed . . . " She paused. "I don't see anything funny in this!"

Because Gilden was smiling. "Derli, you don't give me credit for anything, do you? Not for caring about you, not for worrying about you, not for watching over you. Not even for competence in the one field where I'm supposed to be better than anyone in the Empyrium."

He leaned forward and touched his fingertips to her abdomen. “Don’t worry about the baby. Take my word for it: she’s doing just fine.”

The bee’s kiss, now!
Kiss me as if you entered gay
My heart at some noonday,
A bud that dares not disallow
The claim, so all is rendered up
And passively its shattered cup
Over your head to sleep I bow.
—Robert Browning, from “In A Gondola.” ●

GINGKO

your leaves fall
two hundred twenty million years ago
fans of delicate maidens
pressed between pages of coal

beneath your boughs strut the lucky dragons
but no boneshadows record
that color of crushed dreams in their eyes
when their fortunes change

you grow weary, dwindle toward sleep
until the awakening priests come to plant you
in the Pure Land of their temple gardens
that those who may not eat meat may eat of you

men of science snatch you from the temple precincts
a new geisha to join their harems
coelacanth and nautilus and platypus and you
the most hopeful fossils are those still living

out of love we plant you beside our stone roads
to inhale our burning smoke, to exhale your sweet air
you are patient, so patient you do not worry
who will love you after we are gone.
—Howard V. Hendrix

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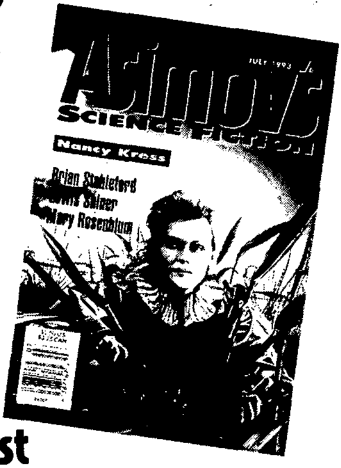
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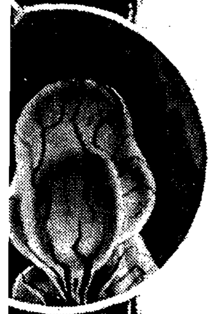
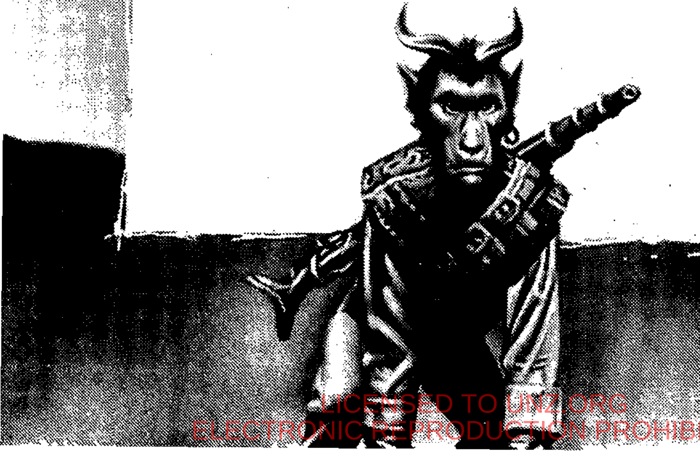


Phillip C. Jennings recently moved into a house in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that he purchased for $14,000. He's since joined an Episcopal Church Choir and is settling into his new neighborhood. In the meantime, Mr. Jennings' fiction continues to take us to wildly imaginative locales such as the strange and exotic . . .

THE VALLEY OF THE HUMANS

Phillip C. Jennings

Illustration by Gary Freeman



We marched nineteen miles today. This is our third long hike from the coast, where the ghoaps gathered us at their Villa Ventoriel. We are fewer than two hundred survivors, all catamaran sailors. The merlows cut the anchor lines of our Leader's fleet in advance of the storm, and our frigates foundered far from sight of land because of their draught. But the catamarans were designed as landing craft. The seas drove us, white with submerged perils, and some vessels reached shore despite our unsprung rudders. And despite merlow attacks. There are many reefs in the Lowland Sea, like teeth inside teeth. We bent to our skills and exhausted ourselves, but it was the luck of the wind which ones made it.

Those who offered resistance to the ghoap beach patrols—they too were slaughtered. We are the few who came ashore too weak and isolated. A fraction. A small shamed fraction of a dead majority.

Nineteen miles today, under a pitiless sun to another ghoap villa. They seem located a day's march apart. This land of pestilence is thinly settled. If other villas lie in between, they belong to the borophs and other species.

Here we sat down. We were measured out pints of good water. We have promises of food later, slops from a boroph villa. Just enough to keep us alive. Too little to give us the energy to conspire. In the long run, I wonder if many will reach whatever goal they have for us.

The mistress of this villa has given me paper and ink. "Write what you will, but say this: Each time you humans invade the Western Lands, the results will be the same. Each time you will lose."

I wrote her words here, but I told her we didn't get a chance to fight. "Give us four thousand ashore, formed up with weapons. The story would be different."

"Four thousand?" she asked. Her lips pulled back from her fangs. "Four thousand donors under a single leader? How is this possible? It's a perversion!"

Let her worry. Let her wonder about what is possible among human beings. Me? I worry about disease and parasites. I'm lightheaded already, and sick with fatigue. I suffered a bellyful of salt water three days ago. The ghoaps caught me vomiting my guts out, but who knows what remains inside? I've lost pints of blood to the filthy leeches of this wet jungle.

I remember my lessons from school. Four hundred years ago, Lacco the Navigator discovered the Western Lands and claimed them, and brought the rotting death back with Him to the Home Countries. The rotting death, the white stink, the western evil—these diseases emptied our villas until slowly we recovered into a new renaissance. They all came from here.

Now we breathe the air, and drink the water, and trudge the mud. Even the green of the vegetation on this side of the world is too bright, lurid and sappy. Leaf-stuff sticks to our skins and dusts us with spores.

Our enemies may not kill us. They may prefer to see how we die. What new diseases we surrender to. The borophs especially have that sort of cunning, but my friend Wernor says otherwise. He is better read than I. He has almost memorized the Classics, and he says we'll be taken to a valley of human prisoners to add to the population. We're just useless spent donors, with a few years of good farm work left in us. That's how the ghoaps and the borophs think!

I must consider that they may steal my words and trade them back to the Home Countries, like they've done with the poetry of Mistress Balsomiel. The greatest poet of these centuries lives a prisoner in western exile, in this same so-called human valley. Wernor—no, none of us is excited. We have no energy. But he would be if he could. The thought of meeting Balsomiel, and working her fields!

An easy day of eleven miles, rain at the beginning, and meat at the end. The ghoaps eat meat and little else. Today we ate like ghoaps. The local mistress sent a tame imp with cords and needles to repair our shoes—those that can be helped to last another few days. He hopped among us on bandy legs, echoing our words for the pleasure of the sounds, because imps are too low for language. We watched his antics, some of us smiling and some shuddering away as from a madman. He's clever with tools. He has ten fingers instead of eight, but his hands are almost human.

This country is higher. Less mud.

I counted. We are 191 donors. So called, although Leader Musmin never got around to accepting every gift, and so a third of us—what a situation! They yearn. Given any strength at all, they yearn. I remember those yearnings, before I gave my gift to Musmin. The unspent ones ate meat an hour ago. Now they look at me and others with those dark hungry eyes, their scalpcrests flushed with passion.

The way our Leader pushed His invasion schedule, I wonder if He ever intended to be honest about accepting four thousand gifts. Could any one body manage so many homuncules? Though Musmin was extraordinarily large and fat, this is true.

He is still alive, but I fear He is dead to those who yearn. His flagship anchored far to the rear of the fleet. I pray He is sailing back to the Home Countries, preparing to share the Sacrament of Reproduction. Our hopes lay in Him. We have failed for the present, but there will be other generations, and other invasions.

Thus we revenge ourselves. What did the ghoaps and the merlows and the borophs know about ocean crossings before our Navigator showed them? But after Lacco they built their own crude fleet, and tried to settle *our* lands while we were dying of their diseases!

I should give a speech. I should remind our unspent donors of the words of our great Leader. The thought of Musmin will make them less frustrated. He was wise, and determined—but what power can be found in words? The fact is, He'll have no second chance, no second fleet. All those homuncules! He's too pregnant, too ripe, lumpy and shapeless with three thousand swelling gifts inside him. Soon He'll be dead, and a footnote in history.

Today a boroph mistress arrived among us. It was midday, and we'd come to a road that winds its way up a cliff escarpment. Ghoap guards ladled out food—an extra meal. Her stew purchased our silence while she lectured us on "true history."

Twenty million years ago, she said, a common ancestor to all the intelligent species of the world developed the power to play games, and imitate, and learn. These dawn creatures evolved into *imps* and *rusks,* and the *imps* split into *merimps* and *orphs* . . . .

"The merimps were the common ancestor of the merlows, and of the protohumans who apparently rode on logs, or otherwise accidentally reached the Eastern Continent, and evolved back into land creatures again. Yourselves."

From her platform Mistress Boroph pointed at us with two thick fingers, a flaccid piebald thing with small slit eyes, twice the bulk of a ghoap. "Here in the west we live in harmony; merlows and ghoaps and imps and orphs, ruddies and busks and borophs. Some of us are not fully intelligent, but we find uses for them. Some of us do not have the full flexibility of hands." (She paused, for she was speaking of her own species, and then she spoke again.)

"You human beings were given too much, off in your eastern isolation. You swim. You talk. You take nourishment from every kind of food. You construct great ships. In your pride, you committed genocide. There were sea-forms among you like our merlows, but you killed them and concealed your sin in the shadows of your dark past. You killed other intelligent species, until you were the only ones. You say you have no history, no memories of these crimes. Let our scientists come among you, and we will dig up the evidence of your guilt.

"Do you suppose we knew nothing about you four centuries ago? Merlow ballads sang of the gray and stormy shores of your Land's End. Merlows cultivated the reefs of Drythorn Island, in the middle of the ocean that lies between us. But then your 'Navigator' sailed west and discovered us, and what was your first act? You humans *claimed* our lands. You meant to plant your villas here, and wipe us out just like the others. The ones who are not even a memory for you!"

The ghoap ladling the stew raised his rough voice. "We will not let ourselves be wiped out!"

"No we will not!" the boroph agreed.

I stood to defend my species, though my feet were swollen from our neverending hike. "You talk as if we felt some urge to kill you deep in our bones. As if humans were bred for evil."

"We have humans among us," the boroph answered. "We study them to search this out. This is the only experiment that is open to us. These last centuries we tried to dwell among you on the Eastern Continent, but you could not tolerate the least admixture, the least sharing—"

"It was an invasion!" I said angrily. "You took advantage of us at our weakest. So weak and so divided that when we had to find a common language to fight you, we took yours and forgot our native tongues! Now we've grown in strength and numbers, and we're letting you know just what your invasion felt like!"

I had the rest of the day to deal with the repercussions of speaking to the boroph mistress like that, because it's made me the front candidate for leader among us humans. All those who have a gift try to get close to me, nervously proffering their homage, and holding out their gift-fingers that special way. I'd never thought of myself before. Tolon of Villa Prosmiel. Leader Tolon! In ordinary society I'd never be called forth. But now the seduction begins in my soul. A harem of donors, willing to do anything for me! The chance to bear homuncules in my own flesh. To become the Sacrament of Reproduction!

We are marching toward the human valley. Mistress Boroph's words confirmed it. It lies a few days on, and Balsomiel lives there. I'd become the Sacrament for the famous poet Balsomiel!

Another thing occurs to me about our donor invasion. Only donors get caught up in grand schemes of war, and no donor would serve a leader until *after* he'd implanted his gift—but in this case that isn't true. Our Leader persuaded and excused, and somehow charmed, and now the situation is unlike anything I know from history. I could be the first human out of the east to take on leadership in the western half of the world.

Was this part of our Leader's plan? Was His failure a first step to success?

We have reached open country southwest of the escarpment. Eight miles today. Our ghoap guards say that ruddies live in the mountains along the forward horizon, foraging the high crags. Our path leads that direction in a straight line between square fields of grain, each bounded by a row of eelwood trees.

Our trek was so short because first we sang the dirge for three fallen comrades. Thevir, Roson, and Gihido succumbed to a coughing sickness, and to lack of heart and hope. The ghoaps took their bodies off to a distance, so we need not smell the feast. They argued that they needed the meat more, because they can't digest roots and fruit the way we do. We are many miles from the nearest ghoap mistress, who might force them to behave less selfishly.

Lacking meat, those who yearn to make me their leader are able to control themselves. I have but to promise, and hug, and kiss, the way would-be leaders do. Wernor has asked to be the first. I've agreed to submit myself in special sequence, letting each choose the words of his ceremony.

I'll be a minor leader, with just fifty or sixty homuncules growing inside. I may last many years before my Sacrament. It's an odd thing to contemplate so much life ahead of me, this soon after the tragedy of our failed invasion.

My thoughts ramble. How many human invasions have failed now? How many invasions since our ancestors drove the last ghoaps and borophs and merlows from their villas at Land's End? But our science keeps growing. Our metallurgy is unsurpassed. These westerners can barely make matchlocks, with rings clamping the barrels to keep them from exploding when they fire. Pistols are beyond them. They guard us with swords and sleep on their scabbards at night. Someday we will bring cannons and mortars to bear on a worthy target, and force open a harbor where we can land in numbers. Donors are made for such glorious hopes.

Afterward? When we have a toehold in the west and the borophs quail in terror? It's the job of our mistresses to think beyond times of glory to times of land and harvests.

Twenty-two miles today! They were flat miles, each marked by stone or herm, our column bending to a swollen-footed shuffle up tree-shaded roads. It will be different tomorrow when we reach the mountains. No one expects such wide progress up the slopes.

The human valley lies beyond. The place where all the prisoners from all the wars are taken—as in past centuries, so now too. In her poetry, Balsomiel describes it as a land of seven sisters and seven villas. Fewer than two hundred, we will not count for much if we are divided seven ways.

I won't be divided from my donors in any case, once I become their leader. The thought is no longer a fantasy. I must accept so many changes! In the future I'll be responsible for myself before others. I must learn to take the best portions at every meal, so I can grow fat. I must learn to delegate all risks. To let others preserve me at the hazard of their lives, while I sit at ease in comfortable security. This is a very different style of behavior, but it comes naturally to leaders. Perhaps the humors released by homuncules in my body will bend my mind to it.

I admit I was uncomfortable when Wernor came to me after whispering among the unspent donors. They have sounded among the spent, to find one who is weakest and most discouraged. Tonight, after the ghoaps have feasted, they will take Steersman Molnor off behind the trees. He will be persuaded, and try hard not to scream, and they will have him hot and raw. If I am to become a leader, I must accept this sort of thing. Spent donors exist for the good of the community. We count for litle otherwise.

Afterward in the night, I will be visited by those who feel strong enough. I'll speak the words of many ceremonies, and be pierced in my flesh. My body hungers for the pain. My mind is terrified.

"Take, Dear Tolon, batchling child of Mistress Prosmiel, and donor to Leader Musmin of the Great Westward Fleet. This is my gift, on this night like unnumbered nights of the past. Do not flinch from this piercing, for it is ordained of the God of Gifts, from the time when space was riven and our world was planted into the warmth of chaos."

"As chaos died to manifold order, so I will die to manifold better forms. Wernor, I accept your gift."

So we whispered, and the nightwind off the mountains blew our words to the empty fields behind. The pain was exquisite as his gift-finger pushed deep into my thigh. It would have been better if I'd cried out, but we did nothing to waken our ghoap guards. They are carnivores. They have noses for blood, and stir restlessly in their sleep. Tomorrow they'll know something has happened. They'll find the gnawed bones of Steersman Molnor. Perhaps they'll chalk it up to sheer hunger for meat. I'll conceal the marks in my flesh, and my donors will make a formation around me—one that seems natural, and does not attract attention.

I am a Leader now. The pain has changed me. I bear the future in my flesh.

The ghoaps woke excited, and found Molnor's body. They dragged it onto the dusty road and formed us in two rows to yap their complaints at us. "We will take you to the guardpost. They will punish you. We sniff blood everywhere. You who eat your own, maybe you have done evil enough to become food for ghoaps."

I think it was their gluttony. "Food for ghoaps!" Thinking too much of their bellies, they failed to investigate closely enough to discover that I reeked of my own blood, not Molnor's, and not from my mouth. Had they tugged off my rags, they'd have seen my new scars.

Walking pained me. My donors offered every solicitude, but I hurt in many places. I told them it was a relief to have other sensations to think about, and not just sore feet.

The road left the plain and began to wind upward, back and forth until it reached a kind of mountain-shoulder, where it made a great arc around the bulk of this first peak. Our old landscape angled out of view. This new place was rugged, with trees only in the downward defiles. Our hearts pounded, and we quickly grew thirsty. Where a little stream rushed near the road, we broke formation. The ghoaps beat at us with the flats of their swords to get us back in line and on the march.

At last we reached the guardpost. Two horned ruddies came out, cradling matchlock rifles in their freakishly long arms. They challenged the ghoaps in a language I could not recognize.

The ghoaps understood only a few words themselves, but enough to make them upset. "Take us to this Leader of yours. We'll be happy to be done with these human scum and go home to Villa Ventoriel. We meant no challenge."

"Humans for us. Leader sleep. Go away."

We began to make a great noise. "We're thirsty!" We acted out what we meant, and pointed to our parched throats.

The ruddies almost—*dismissed* us—up their road, miming water in abundance, splashing everywhere. Our ghoap guards stepped aside. For the next many minutes we hurried on our own. We found the place where a stream gushed from a high spring, down the face of what may have been an ancient quarry into a deep cold pool, dammed up by rocks.

Here we slaked our thirst. Afterward we looked. "There." A ruddie stood where the road bent back into view, the next ridge over.

"There." Another ruddie, far upslope, above the spring.

"There." "There." We were widely surrounded, by creatures so adapted to this terrain that had they not stood posed to be seen, we'd have imagined they weren't here at all.

From some unseen place a trio of ruddies cornered into view and swung along the road on feet and knuckles, using their long arms like crutches, their guns slung over their backs. One of them was lumpish in the extreme, his back and shoulders swollen with encysted homuncules. "So you're another gang of humans," he said. "Your new mistresses should be happy to see you. They'll thank whoever sent you west across the ocean on a fool's quest."

My donors looked to me to answer, Leader to Leader. I flattened my crest like a schoolchild avoiding his teacher's eye. A phenomenon like me should not exist in this hemisphere, and I meant to stay alive. I whispered to Wernor, and he answered in my place. "We have heard of Mistress Balsomiel and her sisters. Of their seven villas."

The Leader crutched closer, and raised the glasses on his necklace-chain to the bridge of his snout. He peered at us like a scholar at the University of Sarpellion might peer at some oddly mutated fish. "Not seven. Not anymore. Just five now. Even virgin mistresses can die, from boredom or accidents. They are very old, you know. Two hundred years or more. Unnaturally old."

" 'Prevented from Death.' " Wernor spoke the title to one of Balsomiel's poems.

" 'Prevented from Death/Until Death becomes fearsome./ Life's journey frozen/No taste in my throat.' " the Leader quoted. "Your way lies ahead of you. We'll watch from our distances, but this is the road. Stick to it. There's a cache of food ahead. You're on your own. Anyone who slips off on a mad quest will learn that ruddies are the masters of this high land. We don't have a taste for meat, but we happily trade with the ghoaps, fresh corpses for sea-salt."

"Your methods tempt us to provide stock for your trade. We will not do so." Wernor repeated my covert words. I gave my orders after the ruddie Leader crutched past us and out of sight. "We'll keep to the road and commit no offenses."

Of our spent donors, those who'd given their gift to Musmin were not obliged to obey me. They did so anyhow. Musmin was not remembered as one who would disagree with my wisdom. In any case, it's always easiest to follow a crowd.

We kept hiking. Clouds piled up against these ruddie-mountains, and enveloped us in fog. At last we reached the cache. Tucked among the bundles was a letter. One of Musmin's donors gave it to me—opened. He'd tried to read it, but it was written in the heavy verticals of two centuries ago, and without our modern flexions.

I handed the page to Wernor, our best classicist. He held it close to his face and recited: "We have a great need for the labor you can provide. We urge you to take no risks. Continue down this road to our valley and we will provide homes, and work, and value for your lives. We would not divide friends from friends, so if you select yourselves into five equal crews, so much the better."

Wernor looked up. "It ends with five signatures, so calligraphied that they're illegible. Mistress W, and O, and S, and B—that must be Balsomiel—and Mistress H."

I made a decision. "If another villa lies very close to Mistress Balsomiel, I'll let a few of my donors live there. Otherwise we all stay together.

The footloose among us can divide their numbers into four crews for W, and O, and S, and H."

We shared out food from the cache. There was more than plenty for all of us. We began to debate whether we should continue, because we were eager to reach these human mistresses and have an end to hiking. But it was late in the day. I felt we should reserve our strength in case the way led another ten miles.

I was not blessed for bedding us by the foggy road, but when my eyes opened after the first sleep of exhaustion, I saw ten thousand stars in a clear night sky, and no lights of habitation anywhere. The human valley was not so close as some of us had argued, and I felt vindicated.

I hunted for the constellations of the ecliptic, where many planets marched, some racing ahead and some doubling backward. Wernor might have named them. Balsomiel certainly could. Each has his or her own legend. Each has his or her particular influence on human affairs, as any poet should know. At the University of Sarpellion, professors keep track of them, suggesting that some may be worlds like our own, and confirming that the Lost Wanderer is indeed lost, and not just the product of a thousand-year-old accounting error.

How does a world vanish? Could it happen to us? But as a whole the skies induce serenity and awe, and I find it hard to worry about such things.

Today we rose aching, and packed what little food we did not eat for breakfast. We walked by a ruddie semaphore station and trudged a road that showed no inclination to turn downhill until the sun crossed overhead. By early afternoon a stream began to keep our road company, and both stream and road curved around a high grassy valley—by the evidence of old fences the place was once someone's ranch villa. After this the road began dropping steeply. We walked into a foothills forest of slender trunks; trees happy for sunlight and jealous of soil. I could not say why my crest rose in pleasure at the sight of them, until Wernor told me that many were native to the Home Countries back east.

We reached another guardpost. A ruddie mistress joined us, carried on a litter by four of her own. Though I kept as far from her as possible, we humans were watched during the drama of this next hour. Our road made an intersection, and she told us to take the right branch and wade across a ford.

Here waited a crowd, humans and a few scrawny ghoaps in human livery. At stations under the ancient trees of this place, our mistresses sat to be acknowledged. "Which is Balsomiel?" Wernor demanded, and the ruddie mistress pointed with her long arm.

I led my donors to Balsomiel's tree. She was sinuously beautiful, with great drowsing eyes. I held my wrists out crossed in formal greeting. "Mistress Balsomiel, I am Tolon of Prosmiel, donor to Leader Musmin. These are your crew, if you will have us."

Balsomiel's eyes shot alive, and she stretched to her full seated length, alarmed by the scent of me. "You! How is it possible?"

"We are watched." Ghoaps moved among us humans, dressed like hired workers, but every one of them might be a spy.

"I've never—why choose me for your doom? Or will my sisters share in you?"

Obviously she knew me for a Leader. I flatttened my crest in denial and warning. "My Sacrament will not come for many years."

"Do you know any old languages?" Balsomiel asked, switching to the language of the Hunjat Peninsula. *"Any of the displaced dialects we humans used to talk? Then we can speak freely."*

"Me know Hunja-speak. Bad talk. Middle good listen."

"I will teach you. By the God of Gifts, the smell of you fills my nostrils! You dying thing, pregnant with death and so damned pleased with yourself! You've found a wonderful meaning for your life, haven't you?"

In the face of her anger I reverted to common speech. "You may soon have a quarrel with your sisters. I mean to deliver fifty-six to your service, when you are entitled to thirty-eight."

"Spare your extras out to the other crews. Surely you can be cold-hearted?"

The ruddies carried their horned mistress to where we were talking. They lowered her litter to the grass. "You seem to be having an interesting conversation," she said to Balsomiel. "Sister, what is this donor to you?"

Apparently my odor was for human noses alone. Balsomiel shrugged. "He speaks a decayed Hunja'hum, a language dear to me. I'd heard it was dead. The death of any language is very like genocide. You creatures of the West accuse us of crimes, but I doubt you are any more innocent. The spreading of your 'common tongue' impoverishes the world."

"Yet there is something about this fellow," the ruddie persisted. Her snout twitched. "Something . . ."

"I was a lieutenant to Leader Musmin," I lied. "Through me these men remember Him. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to persuade some of them to equity. Too many of us want to work for a famous poet. That isn't fair to the others."

I left quickly, my thoughts bubbling over. All this question of scents: could it be that someday our scientists might distill the special humors that enslave us to each other? Thousands, even millions of donors might follow a single Leader! The villas of our Home Countries are linked by bonds of self-interest, not very strongly, but what if all humanity had the chance to inhale the glory of a—a person who might not even exist! We'd follow the dictates of a sophistocracy of university scientists, backed by the products of a special vat!

If a minute with Mistress Balsomiel can inspire me with such visions, I cannot begin to imagine my next years with her. I will be driven most wondrously mad.

I began this new day as a semi-invalid, luxuriating in a four-poster bed, and nibbling on gritcakes. But I prefer to start earlier than this, because Villa Balsomiel is a wonderful place, built in the style of two centuries ago when villas had to be defensible. Balsomiel and her sisters were born in a time of war. In those days we humans challenged the last few coastal villas of our enemies—who included pet humans among their numbers.

In the back-and-forth of those decades, the seven sisters were captured, and cultivated as exquisite treasures for their beauty and brilliant conversation. With the fall of the Gray Harbor villas they were evacuated to the western hemisphere. If I recall Wernor's stories correctly, they did not choose this fate, nor did they summon the spirit to fight against it.

Anyhow, the central structure of this old-fashioned villa is a five story octagon built around an open court, criss-crossed in the heights by winchbeams. From outdoors two wide archways lead to the court, and to inward-facing sheds and stables. Stairs allow ground access to the second level, from which steps wind upward, but at night the bottom stairs are drawn up for protection.

All the rooms open to balcony walkways. Opposite the doors of each chamber, easily shuttered windows spy out across the land. In this upward domain Balsomiel sleeps, and writes, and does her accounts, and entertains her visitors, and stores her gathered wealth. Here also she nurses a few who are not yet strong enough for the rough life of a farmland, while the rest of us bed on bags of straw in the outbuildings.

I will be spared such a life. This I expect, though Balsomiel had angry words for me yesterday. If she persists in her anger, she'll still have to be civil and render me my dignities as a Leader. Otherwise I'll relocate to one of the other villas.

I came to this decision, and when a servant came to take my food tray, I asked if Balsomiel might visit me. He hurried off, but I've heard nothing. I'm beginning to think she plans to avoid me. She's not been enslaved to yearnings, not for two hundred years. She's used to being steered by the promptings of her own intellect.

What can I be to her? A threat, certainly. An object of obsession, and increasingly of hunger as the homuncules of my donors ripen within me.

An omen of her death, because the suspended clockwork of Balsomiel's life will tick again the day that batchlings start to grow in her gut. Once she becomes a mother, she'll be vulnerable to the slow processes of age.

I have decided to copy all these papers. I'll have them sent to her, so she knows that I would like to be something else as well. I want her to know that death does not define me. If I bring death, that is merely the way of things. We all die for the sake of the future, and as a Leader, I lead that way. I'll be the first to go. But meanwhile there's so much else to think and talk about: old languages and new science, astrology, horticulture, and the antics of imps! Can we have a life together where we range all the extremes between laughter and tragedy?

So! So. You cannot know what you ask, when you expect me to end my life. How can you know what it is to live two hundred years? You had six years as a batchling, and then another six—I am generous here—of school and naval training, or so I suspect by your references to this University of Sarpellion. Do you know I have honorary degrees from places out of the East? Universities that didn't exist two centuries ago now elevate me for my poetry. I should go through my papers and discover if Sarpellion is one of them.

Twelve years of life! Perhaps three more to go! You envision us dallying together, exchanging flowersome thoughts, but my thoughts are ancient and perverse. They are not dry thoughts either, not desiccated with age, but wet with liquids that have nothing to do with blood. I have bent entirely away from all this enslavement to Reproduction and Futurity. I would do surgery on myself, if it kept me from smelling you, but I suspect your aura penetrates to deeper places than my nose.

Do I fear you? Yes! It's nothing to do with your personality, but if you could sift your personality from your humors, would the residue be any great thing? You are merely altruistic, and dutiful, and loyal, like any donor. Oh yes, one thing better: you have an intelligent look in your eyes, and so that ghoap mistress gave you paper to write on many days ago.

You write well. I remember the ocean from my confinement in Gray Harbor along the Land's End coast. I miss all that roar and crash. Your words on the sea storm brought it back to me. I could well imagine your terrifying catamaran-ride through the reefs of the Lowland Sea.

Keep writing. The color in your narrative will disguise its purpose, if the borophs are stupid enough to publish you around their villa-burrows. Your words will be smuggled east, and new Leaders will draw maps to this human valley. Start at Villa Ventoriel, and head *x* miles inland . . . .

I have ordered you confined to your room. I'll have you fed into as much easy fatness as any Leader could enjoy, and donors such as Wernor may report to you. But I will keep distant on higher floors. We will communicate *by paper alone. If you do not accept this arrangement, you may try one of my virgin sisters. They are much like me, but none has confronted a leader for two hundred years. I cannot predict how they will behave. I would not have predicted that Rosciel would have committed suicide thirty years ago. Who understands the weights that press down on other souls? Especially souls as ancient as ours!*

Mistress Balsomiel held consistent with her words for five days. She let Wernor search her library and bring books to me. I ate and read, and rested in my confinement. On the sixth day she stormed through my door. *"Has your Hunja'hum improved? God of Gifts, the smell of you spreads everywhere! Look how my throat works in your presence. Shameless! I can no more defy you than if I were a virgin of fifteen! Feasting on meat helps, but if this keeps up, my stalls will be empty of subrusks by the beginning of rainy season."*

"I can understand you. Except 'stalls.'"

She translated, and then switched to common speech. "I have a semaphore message. Several so-called sisters of the species that hold us captive will visit this valley shortly, to make sure your donors are settling in properly. I think there may be rumors among them. They are powerful mistresses in the Western Lands and they must not find you. That ruddie mistress who saw us meet? She was disadvantaged. Ruddies and humans are too far apart on the tree of evolution, but merlows are a neighboring branch, and a merlow mistress would know you at once as a Leader."

She shook out her crest; distressed, decisive, and beautiful all at the same time. "I'll find a cabin for you, out and well hidden. Your donors can carry food during this time of challenge. You are valuable. If not to me, then—well, can I actually defy this call of blood? My thoughts are confused. If they caught you and killed you, I'd be safe. I could carry on my ageless life. I ought to help these visitors, though it would be treason against my species. God, the smell of you makes me shiver! Can you feel any growth?"

"No. The wounds have healed. At this stage I look quite normal," I answered.

Looking at me, her lips grew over-wet and she dabbed them with a handkerchief. "On the Eastern Continent live a few native creatures where the homuncule grows and comes out developed, without any deaths at all. A donor inserts a fertilizing fluid into a pre-existing wound. Batchlings exit the same way. In truth, 'wound' isn't the word for it. It's like a second mouth."

"Our way gives the mother the strength of meat just when she needs it to bear batchlings. The Sacrament brings us together into a social

order," I said. "The creatures you speak of are primitives who fend only for themselves."

Balsomiel laughed. "Whereas I'm so advanced, I ache with the desire to tear into your flesh. Last night I dreamed of a room—bones and blood—me and my sisters smeared and raving for your choice bits. We lost our footing in the slippery mess of your holy moment."

"You make it seem ugly." When I gulped, my throat worked like hers, but less compulsively. "In any case, we have several years yet."

"You would do well to keep to that cabin," Mistress Balsomiel advised. "After two hundred years in isolation, we are not five normal virgins. We may not be able to restrain ourselves until your time is ripe."

"I'll leave this very hour," I said. "That way the smell of me will fade."

"Please. Please do. We can write letters and try to be friends. I can trust myself with ink on paper." She waved her slender hand. "This furniture will be yours in exile, and we'll use this room to store rampions, spices, and herbs."

I kept hidden during the visit. My donors lied about me to the borophs and ghoaps who questioned them, mentioning Musmin always and Tolon never. I do not know if they lied well, but after a time the creatures left the valley. Either their minds were set at ease, or they were not.

Soon afterward, Mistress Balsomiel sent me the manuscript of a story she was working on, making some concessions to modern script. I read all the more quickly as I grew used to her hand. It was a fanciful prophecy: In the future time of a century hence, humans would conquer the West. Only remnants of the non-human peoples would survive. And then?

In her story, great mile-long cannons fired missiles with human mistresses inside, up to the planets of the ecliptic, where marvelous creatures lived. The people of Zeiso enjoyed infinite lives, splitting in two down the middle whenever the tragedy of accidental death made it necessary to fill a vacancy. The people of Tirat followed the example of the primitive quadrupeds of the Eastern Continent, with their reproductive fluids and birth canals. Lacking the Sacrament, altruism was not easy for them. They had to learn it as an extrapolation of the tender feelings of motherhood, but "learning can make a rule more perfect than blood and instinct." And so these Tirat-folk lived in villas of immense size, and cooperated in their millions. They spoke of death as purely evil, and refused the meat of their fellows.

Wherever humans went among the planets, they found weaknesses and exploited them. They spread "unlearning" among the Tirat-folk, so they forgot altruism and warred among themselves. They filled vacancies among the Zeiso people, so they never felt the urge to reproduce, and gradually declined toward extinction. In time, by every conceivable wickedness, humans prevailed across the worlds.

I can't guess what Balsomiel means by this future-fantasy. No one supposes there can be such people as she describes. Her work will be taken as allegory, despite scientific details like the long days on Zeiso, and the shorter years on Tirat. Yet the hate seems real enough. How strange to hate one's own species, and not because we are doomed to fail! Rather, because we're doomed to *succeed!*

I've neglected to describe my refuge in the woods. It lies on a timber trail, not far from a pasture where sometimes my donors herd subrusks. If the grass is good, they spend the night with me rather than return the animals to the distant barns around Villa Balsomiel. I have two rooms and a storage loft, and a bit of flower-garden where light plays down between the trees. I read in the garden when there's no threat of rain. Wernor visits three times a week. If I require food, or firewood, or any little luxury, I tell him, and it comes the next day.

These are not the surroundings in which to contemplate the evils of human life. All is good. I feel hard spots where my donors' homuncules are growing inside me and feeding on my substance. Inside each one, too small for the naked eye, swim thousands of proto-batchlings. By the time they're finally born, there may still be as many as twenty. Twenty times fifty! My own posterity of one thousand!

I dream of answering Balsomiel's story with one of my own, where I prove that in the process of time everything works out for the best. Isn't it true that Leader Musmin's "failure" made my own Leadership possible? And if five human mistresses bear even a few hundred batchlings—some donors and some female—this could mark the beginning of a new stage of human history. I call it serendipity and grace, and I wonder if the God of Gifts lies behind it all.

I have neglected this journal while I wrote my story. I sent it to Balsomiel before I lost my nerve—how can I think what I've scribbled is very good, when I've had no training? But part of me hoped that I was a natural genius.

Balsomiel sent my pages back. "Common rubbish," she called them, messing up my margins with every kind of comment, on my grammar and on my philosophy. "I know you exist. I am reminded by your words, and I'm almost sick with a hunger that can't be normal. If the mistresses of the Eastern Continent were like this, they'd eat every leader before he ripened, and we would grow extinct!"

On a later sheet she wrote again: "Tiresome! Tiresome! I have not had free use of my mind this entire season! My sister Oruniel visited two days ago, and sniffed these pages and the room where you used to be. Even not seeing you, something has changed in her."

I knew about Oruniel before Balsomiel sent me her critique. Riding back to her own villa after this visit, Oruniel sought my cabin and stood at my gate, her throat pulsing as she swayed side to side. "I never thought it would happen!" she wept. "An end to everything! Show yourself! Damn your stink! Let me see you!"

I kept my door closed until she rode away. It seems true. There's something wrong with the mistresses here. My thoughts have firmed as I write this, and I've decided to pack my belongings and go into hiding. There are mountains on both sides of this valley. I'll head toward the foothills away from the road that brought us all here, off my own map and into obscurity. Rosciel's abandoned villa lies that way, so I'll have room.

I'll wait for Wernor's next visit. My donors can arrange supplies. They'll have to deliver them by roundabout methods, with diversions and ruses. I may soon become a hunted animal, and if five mad mistresses range close enough, they won't need ghoap noses to track me down.

They use ghoap noses anyhow. They have ghoap hirelings, so why not? Why not flush the prey and send me haring off yet again after a sleepless night in a tree?

The ghoap couldn't climb after me. I everted my duct and pissed down on him. He told me to stay, and ran back to the Villa Wilweriel. Wilweriel! So now I know that all five mistresses are in on this hunt—a hunt that has worried the fat from my flesh so that I'm as lean as a donor.

Much time has passed since my last entry. I have had adventures—adventures of missed rendezvouses and intercepted supplies and the miseries of rainy season. The last provisions my donors brought me made it through only because Mistress Balsomiel wrote a letter, and she wanted to make sure I got it.

I remember when she was of two minds. When she actually warned me about herself and her sisters. No longer: in her letter she berated me as a fool for scuttling about. *"This 'hunt' is a phantasm. You've taken some remarks and blown them out of proportion. Once you're confined for your own good, you'll learn to trust us. The insanity will be over. We'll treat you well. You need to rest for the sake of your homuncules."*

The ink ran in one spot where she dripped saliva. My donors warned me. "They ride together on great horned busks. They come to your old cabin, and sniff, and take any birdflight as a sign from the Hunting God, and gallop that way."

Today that ghoap will lead them here to Rosciel's high orchard. I'll use the stream to mask my scent, and make my way downhill and across the valley. There's no refuge for me now but along the opposite fringes next to ruddie country. I bear the future in my flesh. For the sake of many lives to come, I endure more hardship than I ever could have imagined. Oh, for a soft bed!

Once I crossed the valley to the northeast side, I sent back my one donor companion to tell Wernor and the others how to help me. I'd picked him up en route, and he'd been helpful—even giving me his shoes—but now I was entirely on my own.

I was afraid of the five mistresses, and I went too far, scaling the first hills. I thought below the tree line I'd be safe, but a ruddie guard saw me.

I'd blundered within a hundred feet of him before either of us knew. He rose; bigger than me, an expert mountaineer with prodigious long arms and a matchlock rifle. I had trespassed. The only question was *how* he was going to kill me.

He raised the matchlock and fired. It exploded. I ran. I ran brilliantly for several minutes, across steep terrain and through pathless young trees, an obstacle course if ever there was one. Fear made it easy, until I woke to the fact that I was still alive.

My thoughts circled back. He'd raised the matchlock. Barrel straight at me. Then angled slightly left. Boom. A flaming cloud of shrapnel and flayed meat. He'd not meant to kill me, just to scare me off. The whole thing seemed pointless, but I didn't forgive him. No man as terrified as I'd been could ever forgive the source of his fear.

I remembered from our hike from the coast: Off-road ruddies guard their territories alone. Even if other ruddies heard the explosion, I'd have time to plunder this one if he was well and truly dead. Then too, it had been a while since I'd had fresh meat.

I forced myself back, struggling through the terrain I'd found so easy in my panic. The ruddie was dead. He'd died instantly. His bandolier was nearly severed by flying bits from the exploding matchlock. I searched through pouches of shot, powder, and wadding, taking anything I found interesting.

Tucked in a pocket behind his shoulder, the ruddie had a wonderful map, detailed of scale and accurate, all centered around the human valley. Hundreds of sentry territories were marked. I began to realize that we captive humans and our affairs were a matter of consequence in the Western Lands, though we believed our dramas were isolated and self-enclosed.

We had not seen it when two hundred donors trudged on foot. Below, where the road passed the semaphore station, cliffs concealed a place from which these guards fan out on their shifts. It must be the headquarters for those who make humanity their study. I remembered how that boroph mistress had called this valley an "experiment." What kind of experiment? Something that leads to the development of weapons against our species?

Of course.

I satisfied pride more than hunger with a mouthful of meat. I was too fearful, too excited, for a long feast, and so I left with what I had. With the map came a couple of pages. They were numbered and each had several signatures. I took them for written orders, but in the language of the ruddies, which I could not read.

I've turned back downhill. I know a place where donors come at intervals. I'll wait for one, and send these captured orders to Mistress Balsomiel for her to translate. She will serve my curiosity—why?

Because I'll write a covering letter. I'll say those orders are evidence of a plot against humanity! I'll say the hunger that drives her mad is artificially induced! She has written a fantasy about the peoples of a dozen planets, all fatally flawed so that our species expands at their expense. She may be willing to turn the thing on its head: *We* have a fatal flaw! We must prevail against our vulnerability to scents and humors, or the human race will vanish into extinction.

I don't think Balsomiel will dismiss this letter as "common rubbish," as she dismissed my poor story. The more I think about it, the more I wonder.

The more I think I'm telling the truth.

Leader Tolon of Prosmiel, you flatter your persecutor to suppose I am fluent in the language of the ruddies. I know some words, and have studied these orders you sent, concentrating as best I can in my sorry condition, which you say is artificially produced. Would you suspect then that my hired ghoaps spray this villa with evil perfumes? I have always known they were spies. Harmlessly stupid spies, but it doesn't take brains to perform this sort of mischief. Now that I have enough humans to do the work around here, I have decided I can carry on without them, and I've sent them away.

Wait some few days, to see if my wits come back. Despite the gaps, these ruddie-orders are suggestive. They name you, and in that same sentence they use the word "insist." This doubles the effect of whatever they're saying, so you must be important. All this bears out your suspicions.

If the creatures of the West invade the Home Countries, and smoke our villas with artificial scents, our human Leaders would be slaughtered by mad mistresses. In a few years, our last generation of batchlings might mature; some remnant of them undefeated. A second campaign would *repeat the successes of the first. We would consume our future in one last frenzy, and grow extinct. How simple!*

I thought I hated my own human species, so recklessly keen for war and expansion. Now I see us as weak, not strong, and my feelings have turned. Because we might vanish, we must find a way to prevail. If you have any ideas, I invite you to enlist my cooperation.

A Leader needs a cause. I'd been miserable, with nothing to say to the donors who sacrificed their leisure to keep me fed and clothed. Whoever reads these pages will know if I'm right to suspect that our enemies are testing a weapon on us—the few humans of this valley—before unleashing an attack on the Eastern Continent. Perhaps you'll know me for a fool, but everything tempts me toward this folly. I am a Leader. I'm made to put myself in the center of larger-than-life dramas.

Donors are followers. Now that I have something to say—convincing *myself* is the only problem—I will enlist them to serve me. We'll show our enemies that humans can take the steps necessary to survive this newest sort of warfare.

If! If my folly is true! I suppose then that our enemies *wanted* someone to become a Leader during our hike to this valley. They may have been able to tell we had unspent donors.

They fed us meat. They gave us incompetent ghoap guards who slept at night, or else they pretended to be incompetent. They checked our progress, sending a ruddie Leader to make sure of my new status. On the one hand, they were happy to see things develop as they'd hoped. On the other, they had to pretend they were adverse to human leadership in the West, or we'd have caught on a long time ago.

They played the game well. Now it's my turn. I'm waiting for Wernor at a rendezvous spot near a confluence of shallow streams. My donors planted tamberries in the silt where the water ran high during the rainy season, and tamberry bushes bear fruit without much tending. I can stay here another day without worrying about my belly.

Wernor came. I sent him back with orders and he fetched my fifty-plus donors. They dropped their tools and left our mistresses' fields to come here.

I spoke to them, and they believed me. They roared with anger at our enemies. I told them to spread the news to all five villas, but by no means to let anyone of another species know that we were working against their plot.

Ah, *this* is Leadership! Three dozens formed in protection around me, and improvised a litter to carry me back to Villa Balsomiel.

Balsomiel must know what's coming next. As soon as most of her workforce vanished, she'd have suspected that events were coming to a crisis. She might flee, but where? Or she may accept these new realities. Her recent letter makes me hope.

Balsomiel had retreated into the upper floors of her villa, winching up the ground floor steps. Once my donors secured the wider area, I strode into the central court and called up to her. "Mistress my Lady! Can you stay there? We'll provide food, and take your advice for the better keeping of your estate. Can you tell if you're in control of yourself since sending away the ghoaps?"

Balsomiel moved to the rail of the third-floor balcony. "I think perhaps I am. I could be deluded by my hopes, but I think so."

"If your four sisters ride to save you, there'll be trouble. We can tree them into the upper floors of their villas, but we can't risk killing them, even if they use weapons to slaughter us. You could send letters asking them to cooperate like you've done, or do you think that's wise? Perhaps we should try surprise, and march on Villa Oruniel this same night."

Balsomiel shook out her crest. "I've already sent those letters. It's too late for surprise. March anyhow. Give them no time to contemplate evil choices. Life as we've known it for two hundred years in this human valley is coming to an end. What will happen now? In their confusion they may do anything."

I gave orders. After four hours of rest we formed up to hike to Villa Oruniel. At sunrise we reached a racing oval at the foot of Oruniel's central octagon-tower. Here we met a defensive force of donors; humans and ghoap hirelings.

I moved out into the open space of the oval, and began my speech. Toward the end I ordered the humans to prepare the ghoaps for a feast of triumph. My donors made a rush—and Oruniel's human workers joined in. "None must escape, or they'll tell their mistresses that their evil experiment is over!"

We confined Oruniel. The next day we confined Wilweriel and Saguriel. The donors of four villas converged on Holophiel as she exercised her busk at the far end of the valley, a place hemmed by cliffs. She trotted to her villa in no great panic, and pulled up her stairs. "We will not be allowed to reproduce," she called down to me. "You won't survive to ripen. There'll be no Sacrament. Do you think our enemies want human batchlings spawning in the West?"

"You seem rational," I answered. "Dismally so, to tell the truth."

"I sent off my ghoaps as soon as I got my sister's letter," Holophiel said. "It's made a difference. It pleases me that I will die in possession of my faculties, when the ruddies come to kill us. It'll be the ruddies, don't you think? They're the closest. They have many guards with matchlocks."

"There must be some mechanism," I answered. "All these species living together, and not constantly at war with each other? There must be a trick to it. Before the ruddies do anything they can't undo, they'll have to gain the assent of the borophs, and the merlows, and all the rest. It'll take time. Some factions may dissent. Killing us all is a little genocide, isn't it?" I asked. "And killing a poet! That's got to rub some of them wrong. Balsomiel's as popular in the West as she is in the East."

Holophiel nodded. "We live under a state of siege. Not knowing the day of our doom."

"You are still mistress here until then," I said. "Your workers will take your orders. All I ask is that you keep confined for a time."

"I expected as much," Holophiel responded.

Time. Our enemies spent decades working with their vats and odors, waiting for a chance to test us. They are not as impatient as humans.

Now they've consumed another two years debating what to do about this human valley in their midst. Oh, the first threat came quickly enough: Give up Leader Tolon, and they'd let the rest of us live. But I'm the host to fifty-six homuncules, and my fifty-six donors would not allow me to surrender myself. It's *their* future I serve first and foremost. They obey me as they obey our captive mistresses, and keep me respectfully imprisoned in my forest cabin. If the human race can boast of anything, let us rejoice in our donors, who so well combine the sometimes discordant gifts of intelligence and good service.

There are signs of ripeness. My cysts have grown large, and I may just now be barely ready. It would be better to wait another year. I've decided to split the difference, and appoint my Sacrament for the beginning of rainy season. Or maybe just a few days after, so I can see the new flowers bloom one last time, as I'm carried to the ceremony at Villa Balsomiel.

In her latest letter to me, Balsomiel tells me of a recent propaganda-message from the merlows, conveyed by semaphore: They can do surgery, they say. They can extract the ripened homuncules from the body of a merlow Leader, and yet keep him alive. This has actually been done, and they'll bring the survivor if I like, the better to persuade me to submit to their careful knives. As if the world needs ex-Leaders! We have no idea why they're making this freakish offer, except that if their surgeons fail and kill me, my homuncules would go into distress before our five mistresses could eat them. Why shouldn't they descend to the level of such desperate tricks? I shall ignore this opportunity to become a monster. I won't even dignify their offer with a reply.

* * *

Dear reader: Leader Tolon of Prosmiel gave himself as he promised to me and my sisters, a few days into rainy season. I ate to repletion, and took eleven homuncules. The bloody tablecloth on which he lay now hangs from my villa's winch-beams, in highest honor. In the natural course of things, I will give birth eleven times to eleven batches, and then my humors will dry up, and not long afterward I will die.

We still have not been attacked. We believe we have spared the Eastern Continent from becoming a battleground, which is sufficient justification for maintaining the normal cycles of life while doom hangs over us. Leader Tolon was a very normal Leader among us humans, and so our enemies know their weapon is ineffective at disrupting human society. In what we do now, we are a sign that human life will go on in oblivious triumph, despite plots to do with chemistry and perfumes.

We will go on until the ruddies sweep in with licenses and permissions, and kill us all.

I have nothing left to say. If I write these next words, it's to erase them, and burn the page I've just taken in hand. I cannot let a lie spread across half the world without secretly telling the truth. Tolon of Prosmiel was no ordinary Leader. No ordinary Leader would have survived our hunts, and dealt so fairly with us afterward. No ordinary Leader would have—well, I could go on. I have a feeling toward his memory. It's like how I feel about my sisters, and I'm not sure any of the languages of this world have a word for it, because it has nothing to do with how he smelled. I shall try to invent this word in my future poetry, in the time that remains to me before we die. ●

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Ursula K. Le Guin

FORGIVENESS DAY

We are extremely pleased to be honored with the chance to publish a major new Ursula K. Le Guin novella. "Forgiveness Day" shares the Ekumen universe of her Hugo- and Nebula-Award winning novels *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness.* Ms. Le Guin has written over seventy short stories, two collections of essays, three volumes of poetry, and sixteen novels. She has received a total of five Hugos and four Nebulas, and lists the World Fantasy Award, the Kafka Award, and a Pushcart Prize among her many impressive writing credentials.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

Solly had been a space brat, a Mobile's child, living on this ship and that, this world and that; she'd traveled five hundred lightyears by the time she was ten. At twenty-five she had been through a revolution on Alterra, learned *aiji* on Terra and farthinking from an old hilfer on Rokanan, breezed through the Schools on Hain, and survived an assignment as Observer in murderous, dying Kheakh, skipping another half-millennium at near lightspeed in the process. She was young, but she'd been around.

She got bored with the Embassy people in Voe Deo telling her to watch out for this, remember that; she was a Mobile herself now, after all. Werel had its quirks—what world didn't? She'd done her homework, she knew when to curtsey and when not to belch, and vice versa. It was a relief to get on her own at last, in this gorgeous little city, on this gorgeous little continent, the first and only Envoy of the Ekumen to the Divine Kingdom of Gatay.

She was high for days on the altitude, the tiny, brilliant sun pouring vertical light into the noisy streets, the peaks soaring up incredibly behind every building, the dark-blue sky where great near stars burned all day, the dazzling nights under six or seven lolloping bits of moon, the tall black people with their black eyes, narrow heads, long, narrow hands and feet, gorgeous people, her people! She loved them all. Even if she saw a little too much of them.

The last time she had had completely to herself was a few hours in the passenger cabin of the airskimmer sent by Gatay to bring her across the ocean from Voe Deo. On the airstrip she was met by a delegation of priests and officials from the King and the Council, magnificent in scarlet and brown and turquoise, and swept off to the Palace, where there was a lot of curtseying and no belching, of course, for hours—an introduction to his little shrunken old majesty, introductions to High Muckamucks and Lord Hooziwhats, speeches, a banquet—all completely predictable, no problems at all, not even the impenetrable giant fried flower on her plate at the banquet. But with her, from that first moment on the airstrip and at every moment thereafter, discreetly behind or beside or very near her, were two men: her Guide and her Guard.

The Guide, whose name was San Ubattat, was provided by her hosts in Gatay; of course he was reporting on her to the government, but he was a most obliging spy, endlessly smoothing the way for her, showing her with a bare hint what was expected or what would be a gaffe, and an excellent linguist, ready with a translation when she needed one. San was all right. But the Guard was something else.

He had been attached to her by the Ekumen's hosts on this world, the dominant power on Werel, the big nation of Voe Deo. She had promptly protested to the Embassy back in Voe Deo that she didn't need or want a bodyguard. Nobody in Gatay was out to get her and even if they were she preferred to look after herself. The Embassy sighed. Sorry, they said. You're stuck with him. Voe Deo has a military presence in Gatay, which after all is a client state, economically dependent. It's in Voe Deo's interest to protect the legitimate government of Gatay against the native terrorist factions, and you get protected as one of their interests. We can't argue with that.

She knew better than to argue with the Embassy, but she could not resign herself to the Major. His military title, rega, she translated by the archaic word "Major," from a skit she'd seen on Terra. That Major had been a stuffed uniform, covered with medals and insignia. It puffed and strutted and commanded, and finally blew up into bits of stuffing. If only this Major would blow up! Not that he strutted, exactly, or even commanded, directly. He was stonily polite, woodenly silent, stiff and cold as rigor mortis. She soon gave up any effort to talk to him; whatever she said, he replied Yessum or Nomum with the prompt stupidity of a man who does not and will not actually listen, an officer officially incapable of humanity. And he was with her in every public situation, day and night, on the street, shopping, meeting with businessmen and officials, sightseeing, at court, in the balloon ascent above the mountains—with her everywhere, everywhere but bed.

Even in bed she wasn't quite as alone as she would often have liked; for the Guide and the Guard went home at night, but in the anteroom of her bedroom slept the Maid— a gift from His Majesty, her own private asset.

She remembered her incredulity when she first learned that word, years ago, in a text about slavery. "On Werel, members of the dominant caste are called *owners;* members of the serving class are called *assets*. Only owners are referred to as men and women; assets are called bondsmen, bondswomen."

So here she was, the owner of an asset. You don't turn down a king's gift. Her asset's name was Rewe. Rewe was probably a spy too, but it was hard to believe. She was a dignified, handsome woman some years older than Solly and about the same intensity of skin-color, though Solly was pinkish-brown and Rewe was bluish-brown. The palms of her hands were a delicate azure. Rewe's manners were exquisite and she had tact, astuteness, an infallible sense of when she was wanted and when not. Solly of course treated her as an equal, stating right out at the beginning that she believed no human being had a right to dominate, much less own, another, that she would give Rewe no orders, and that she hoped they might become friends. Rewe accepted this, unfortunately, as a new set of orders. She smiled and said yes. She was infinitely yielding. Whatever Solly said or did sank into that acceptance and was lost, leaving Rewe unchanged: an attentive, obliging, gentle physical presence, just out of reach. She smiled, and said yes, and was untouchable.

And Solly began to think, after the first fizz of the first days in Gatay, that she needed Rewe, really needed her as a woman to talk with. There was no way to meet Owner women, who lived hidden away, "at home," they called it. All bondswomen but Rewe were somebody else's property, not hers to talk to. All she ever met was men. And eunuchs.

That had been another thing hard to believe, that a man would voluntarily trade his virility for a little social standing; but she met such men all the time in King Hotat's court. Born assets, they were freed from slavery by becoming eunuchs, and as such often rose to positions of considerable power and trust among their owners. The eunuch Tayandan, majordomo of the palace, ruled the king, who didn't rule, but figureheaded for the Council. The Council was made up of various kinds of lord but only one kind of priest, Tualites. Only assets worshipped Kamye, and the original religion of Gatay had been suppressed when the monarchy became Tualite a century or so ago. If there was one thing she really disliked about Werel, aside from slavery and gender-dominance, it was the religions. The songs about Lady Tual were beautiful, and the statues of her and the great temples in Voe Deo were wonderful, and the *Arkamye* seemed to be a good story though longwinded; but the deadly self-righteousness, the intolerance, the stupidity of the priests, the hideous doctrines that justified every cruelty in the name of the faith! As a matter of fact, Solly said to herself, was there anything she *did* like about Werel?

And answered herself instantly: I love it, I love it. I love this weird little bright sun and all the broken bits of moons and the mountains going up like ice walls and the people—the people with their black eyes without whites like animals' eyes, eyes like dark glass, like dark water, mysterious—I want to love them, I want to know them, I want to reach them!

But she had to admit that the pissants at the Embassy had been right about one thing: being a woman was tough on Werel. She fit nowhere. She went about alone, she had a public position, and so was a contradiction in terms: proper women stayed at home, invisible. Only bondswomen went out in the streets, or met strangers, or worked at any public job. She behaved like an asset, not like an owner. Yet she was something very grand, an envoy of the Ekumen, and Gatay very much wanted to join the Ekumen and not to offend its envoys. So the officials and courtiers and businessmen she talked to on the business of the Ekumen did the best they could: they treated her as if she were a man.

The pretense was never complete and often broke right down. The poor old king groped her industriously, under the vague impression that she was one of his bedwarmers. When she contradicted Lord Gatuyo in a discussion, he stared with the blank disbelief of a man who has been talked back to by his shoe. He had been thinking of her as a woman. But in general the disgenderment worked, allowing her to work with them; and she began to fit herself into the game, enlisting Rewe's help in making clothes that resembled what male owners wore in Gatay, avoiding anything that to them would be specifically feminine. Rewe was a quick, intelligent seamstress. The bright, heavy, close-fitted trousers were practical and becoming, the embroidered jackets were splendidly warm. She liked wearing them. But she felt unsexed by these men who could not accept her for what she was. She needed to talk to a woman.

She tried to meet some of the hidden owner women through the owner men, and met a wall of politeness without a door, without a peephole. What a wonderful idea; we will certainly arrange a visit when the weather is better! I should be overwhelmed with the honor if the Envoy were to entertain Lady Mayoyo and my daughters, but my foolish, provincial girls are so unforgivably timid—I'm sure you understand. Oh, surely, surely, a tour of the inner gardens—but not at present, when the vines are not in flower! We must wait until the vines are in flower!

There was nobody to talk to, nobody, until she met Batikam the Makil.

It was an event: a touring troupe from Voe Deo. There wasn't much going on in Gatay's little mountain capital by way of entertainment, except for temple dancers—all men, of course—and the soppy fluff that passed as drama on the Werelian network. Solly had doggedly entered some of these wet pastels, hoping for a glimpse into the life "at home"; but she couldn't stomach the swooning maidens who died of love while the stiffnecked jackass heroes, who all looked like the Major, died nobly in battle, and Tual the Merciful leaned out of the clouds smiling upon their deaths with her eyes slightly crossed and the whites showing, a sign of divinity. She had noticed that Werelian men never entered the network for drama. Now she knew why. But the receptions at the palace and the parties in her honor given by various lords and businessmen were pretty dull stuff: all men, always, because they wouldn't have the slavegirls in while the Envoy was there; and she couldn't flirt even with the nicest men, couldn't remind them that they were men, since that would remind them that she was a woman not behaving like a lady. The fizz had definitely gone flat by the time the makil troupe came.

She asked San, a reliable etiquette advisor, if it would be all right for her to attend the performance. He hemmed and hawed and finally, with more than usually oily delicacy, gave her to understand that it would be all right so long as she went dressed as a man. "Women, you know, don't go in public. But sometimes, they want so much to see the entertainers, you know? Lady Amatay used to go with Lord Amatay, dressed in his clothes, every year; everybody knew, nobody said anything—you know. For you, such a great person, it would be all right. Nobody will say anything. Quite, quite all right. Of course, I come with you, the rega comes with you. Like friends, ha? You know, three good men friends going to the entertainment, ha? Ha?"

Ha, ha, she said obediently. What fun!— But it was worth it, she thought, to see the makils.

They were never on the network. Young girls at home were not to be exposed to their performances, some of which, San gravely informed her, were unseemly. They played only in theaters. Clowns, dancers, prostitutes, actors, musicians, the makils formed a kind of subclass, the only assets not personally owned. A talented slave boy bought by the Entertainment Corporation from his owner was thenceforth the property of the Corporation, which trained and looked after him the rest of his life.

They walked to the theater, six or seven streets away. She had forgotten that the makils were all transvestites, indeed she did not remember it when she first saw them, a troop of tall slender dancers sweeping out onto the stage with the precision and power and grace of great birds wheeling, flocking, soaring. She watched unthinking, enthralled by their beauty, until suddenly the music changed and the clowns came in, black as night, black as owners, wearing fantastic trailing skirts, with fantastic jutting jewelled breasts, singing in tiny, swoony voices, "Oh do not rape me please kind Sir, no no, not now!" They're men, they're men! Solly realized then, already laughing helplessly. By the time Batikam finished his star turn, a marvelous dramatic monologue, she was a fan. "I want to meet him," she said to San at a pause between acts. "The actor—Batikam."

San got the bland expression that signified he was thinking how it could be arranged and how to make a little money out of it. But the Major was on guard, as ever. Stiff as a stick, he barely turned his head to glance at San. And San's expression began to alter.

If her proposal was out of line, San would have signaled or said so. The Stuffed Major was simply controlling her, trying to keep her as tied down as one of "his" women. It was time to challenge him. She turned to him and stared straight at him. "Rega Teyeo," she said, "I quite comprehend that you're under orders to keep me in order. But if you give orders to San or to me, they must be spoken aloud, and they must be justified. I will not be managed by your winks or your whims."

There was a considerable pause, a truly delicious and rewarding pause. It was difficult to see if the Major's expression changed; the dim theater light showed no detail in his blueblack face. But there was something frozen about his stillness that told her she'd stopped him. At last he said, "I'm charged to protect you, Envoy."

"Am I endangered by the makils? Is there impropriety in an Envoy of the Ekumen congratulating a great artist of Werel?"

Again the frozen silence. "No," he said.

"Then I request you to accompany me when I go backstage after the performance to speak to Batikam."

One stiff nod. One stiff, stuffy, defeated nod. Score one! Solly thought, and sat back cheerfully to watch the lightpainters, the erotic dances, and the curiously touching little drama with which the evening ended. It was in archaic poetry, hard to understand, but the actors were so beautiful, their voices so tender that she found tears in her eyes and hardly knew why.

"A pity the makils always draw on the *Arkamye,*" said San, with smug, pious disapproval. He was not a very highclass owner, in fact he owned no assets; but he was an owner, and a bigoted Tualite, and liked to remind himself of it. "Scenes from the *Incarnations of Tual* would be more befitting such an audience."

"I'm sure you agree, Rega," she said, enjoying her own irony.

"Not at all," he said, with such toneless politeness that at first she did not realize what he had said; and then forgot the minor puzzle in the bustle of finding their way and gaining admittance to the backstage and to the performers' dressingroom.

When they realized who she was, the managers tried to clear all the other performers out, leaving her alone with Batikam (and San and the Major, of course); but she said no, no, no, these wonderful artists must not be disturbed, just let me talk a moment with Batikam. She stood there in the bustle of doffed costumes, half-naked people, smeared makeup, laughter, dissolving tension after the show, any backstage on any world, talking with the clever, intense man in elaborate archaic woman's costume. They hit it off at once. "Can you come to my house?" she asked. "With pleasure," Batikam said, and his eyes did not flick to San's or the Major's face: the first bondsman she had yet met who did not glance to her Guard or her Guide for permission to say or do anything, anything at all. She glanced at them only to see if they were shocked. San looked collusive, the Major looked rigid. "I'll come in a little while," Batikam said, "I must change."

They exchanged smiles, and she left. The fizz was back in the air. The huge stars hung clustered like grapes of fire. A moon tumbled over the icy peaks, another jigged like a lopsided lantern above the curlicue pinnacles of the palace. She strode along the dark street, enjoying the freedom of the male robe she wore and its warmth, making San trot to keep up; the Major, longlegged, kept pace with her. A high, trilling voice called, "Envoy!" and she turned with a smile, then swung round, seeing the Major grappling momentarily with someone in the shadow of a portico. He broke free, caught up to her without a word, seized her arm in an iron grip and dragged her into a run. "Let go!" she said, struggling; she did not want to use an aiji break on him, but nothing less was going to get her free.

He pulled her nearly off balance with a sudden dodge into an alley; she ran with him, letting him keep hold on her arm. They came unexpectedly out into her street and to her gate, through it, into the house, which he unlocked with a word—how did he do that?—"What is all this?" she demanded, breaking away easily, holding her arm where his grip had bruised it.

She saw, outraged, the last flicker of an exhilarated smile on his face. Breathing hard, he asked, "Are you hurt?"

"Hurt? Where you yanked me, yes—what do you think you were doing?"

"Keeping the fellow away."

"What fellow?"

He said nothing.

"The one who called out? Maybe he wanted to talk to me!"

After a moment the Major said, "Possibly. He was in the shadow. I thought he might be armed. I must go out and look for San Ubattat. Please keep the door locked until I come back." He was out the door as he gave the order; it never occurred to him that she would not obey, and she did obey, raging. Did he think she couldn't look after herself? that she needed him interfering in her life, kicking slaves around, "protecting" her? Maybe it was time he saw what an aiji fall looked like. He was strong and quick, but had no real training. This kind of amateur interference was intolerable, really intolerable; she must protest to the Embassy again.

As soon she let him back in with a nervous, shamefaced San in tow, she said, "You opened my door with a password. I was not informed that you had right of entrance day and night."

He was back to his military blankness. "Nomum," he said.

"You are not to do so again. You are not to seize hold of me ever again. I must tell you that if you do I will injure you. If something alarms you, tell me what it is and I will respond as I see fit. Now will you please go."

"With pleasure, mum," he said, wheeled, and marched out.

"Oh, Lady—Oh, Envoy," San said, "that was a dangerous person, extremely dangerous people, I am so sorry, disgraceful," and he babbled on. She finally got him to say who he thought it was, a religious dissident, one of the Old Believers who held to the original religion of Gatay and wanted to cast out or kill all foreigners and unbelievers. "A bondsman?" she asked with interest, and he was shocked—"Oh, no, no, a real person, a man—but most misguided, a fanatic, a heathen fanatic! Knifemen, they call themselves. But a man, Lady—Envoy, certainly a man!"

The thought that she might think that an asset might touch her upset him as much as the attempted assault. If such it had been.

As she considered it, she began to wonder if, since she had put the Major in his place at the theater, he had found an excuse to put her in her place by "protecting" her. Well, if he tried it again he'd find himself upside down against the opposite wall.

"Rewe!" she called, and the bondswoman appeared instantly as always. "One of the actors is coming. Would you like to make us a little tea, something like that?" Rewe smiled, said, "Yes," and vanished. There was a knock at the door. The Major opened it—he must be standing guard outside—and Batikam came in.

It had not occurred to her that the makil would still be in women's clothing, but it was how he dressed offstage too, not so magnificently, but with elegance, in the delicate, flowing materials and dark, subtle hues that the swoony ladies in the dramas wore. It gave considerable piquancy, she felt, to her own male costume. Batikam was not as handsome as the Major, who was a stunning-looking man till he opened his mouth; but the makil was magnetic, you had to look at him. He was a dark greyish brown, not the blueblack that the owners were so vain of (though there were plenty of black assets, too, Solly had noticed: of course, when every bondswoman was her owner's sexual servant). Intense, vivid intelligence and sympathy shone in his face through the makil's stardust-black makeup, as he looked around with a slow, lovely laugh at her, at San, and at the Major standing at the door. He laughed like a woman, a warm ripple, not the ha, ha of a man. He held out his hands to Solly, and she came forward and took them. "Thank you for coming, Batikam!" she said, and he said, "Thank you for asking me, Alien Envoy!"

"San," she said, "I think this is your cue?"

Only indecision about what he ought to do could have slowed San down till she had to speak. He still hesitated a moment, then smiled with unction and said, "Yes, so sorry, a very good night to you, Envoy! Noon hour at the Office of Mines tomorrow, I believe?" Backing away, he backed right into the Major, who stood like a post in the doorway. She looked at the Major, ready to order him out without ceremony, how dare he shove back in!—and saw the expression on his face. For once his blank mask had cracked, and what was revealed was contempt. Incredulous, sickened contempt. As if he was obliged to watch someone eat a turd.

"Get out," she said. She turned her back on both of them. "Come on, Batikam; the only privacy I have is in here," she said, and led the makil to her bedroom.

He was born where his fathers before him were born, in the old, cold house in the foothills above Noeha. His mother did not cry out as she bore him, since she was a soldier's wife, and a soldier's mother, now. He was named for his greatuncle, killed in the first Tribal Mutiny on Yeowe. He grew up in the stark discipline of a poor household of pure veot lineage. His father, when he was on leave, taught him the arts a soldier must know; when his father was on duty the old Asset-Sergeant Habbakam took over the lessons, which began at five in the morning, summer or winter, with worship, shortsword practice, and a cross-country run. His mother and grandmother taught him the other arts a man must know, beginning with good manners before he was two, and after his second birthday going on to history, poetry, and sitting still without talking.

The child's day was filled with lessons and fenced with disciplines; but a child's day is long. There was room and time for freedom, the freedom of the farmyard and the open hills. There was the companionship of pets, foxdogs, running dogs, spotted cats, hunting cats, and the farm cattle and the greathorses; not much companionship otherwise. The family's assets, other than Habbakam and the two housewomen, were serfs, sharecropping the stony foothill land that they and their owners had lived on forever. Their children were light-skinned, shy, already stooped to their lifelong work, ignorant of anything beyond their fields and hills. Sometimes they swam with Teyeo, summers, in the pools of the river. Sometimes he rounded up a couple of them to play soldiers with him. They stood awkward, uncouth, smirking when he shouted "Charge!" and rushed at the invisible enemy. "Follow me!" he cried shrilly, and they lumbered after him, firing their tree-branch guns at random, pow, pow. Mostly he went alone, riding his good mare Tasi or afoot with a hunting cat pacing by his side.

A few times a year visitors came to the estate, relatives or fellow-officers of Teyeo's father, bringing their children and their housepeople. Teyeo silently and politely showed the child guests about, introduced them to the animals, took them on rides. Silently and politely, he and his cousin Gemat came to hate each other; at age fourteen they fought for an hour in a glade behind the house, punctiliously following the rules of wrestling, relentlessly hurting each other, getting bloodier and wearier and more desperate, until by unspoken consent they called it off and returned in silence to the house, where everyone was gathering for dinner. Everyone looked at them and said nothing. They washed up hurriedly, hurried to table. Gemat's nose leaked blood all through the meal; Teyeo's jaw was so sore he could not open it to eat. No one commented.

Silently and politely, when they were both fifteen, Teyeo and Rega Toebawe's daughter fell in love. On the last day of her visit they escaped by unspoken collusion and rode out side by side, rode for hours, too shy to talk. He had given her Tasi to ride. They dismounted to water and rest the horses in a wild valley of the hills. They sat near each other, not very near, by the side of the little quiet-running stream. "I love you," Teyeo said. "I love you," Emdu said, bending her shining black face down. They did not touch or look at each other. They rode back over the hills, joyous, silent.

When he was sixteen Teyeo was sent to the Officers' Academy in the capital of his province. There he continued to learn and practice the arts of war and the arts of peace. His province was the most rural in Voe Deo; its ways were conservative, and his training was in some ways anachronistic. He was of course taught the technologies of modern warfare, becoming a first-rate pod pilot and an expert in telereconnaissance; but he was not taught the modern ways of thinking that accompanied the technologies in other schools. He learned the poetry and history of Voe Deo, not the history and politics of the Ekumen. The Alien presence on Werel remained remote, theoretical to him. His reality was the old reality of the veot class, whose men held themselves apart from all men not soldiers and in brotherhood with all soldiers, whether owners, assets, or enemies. As for women, Teyeo considered his rights over them absolute, binding him absolutely to responsible chivalry to women of his own class and protective, merciful treatment of bondswomen. He believed all foreigners to be basically hostile, untrustworthy heathens. He honored the Lady Tual, but worshipped the Lord Kamye. He expected no justice, looked for no reward, and valued above all competence, courage, and self-respect. In some respects he was utterly unsuited to the world he was to enter, in others well prepared for it, since he was to spend seven years on Yeowe fighting a war in which there was no justice, no reward, and never even an illusion of ultimate victory.

Rank among veot officers was hereditary. Teyeo entered active service as a rega, the highest of the three veot ranks. No degree of ineptitude or distinction could lower or raise his status or his pay. Material ambition was no use to a veot. But honor and responsibility were to be earned, and he earned them quickly. He loved service, loved the life, knew he was good at it, intelligently obedient, effective in command; he had come out of the Academy with the highest recommendations, and being posted to the capital, drew notice as a promising officer as well as a likeable young man. At twenty-four he was absolutely fit, his body would do anything he asked of it. His austere upbringing had given him little taste for indulgence but an intense appreciation of pleasure, so the luxuries and entertainments of the capital were a discovery of delight to him. He was reserved and rather shy, but companionable and cheerful. A handsome young man, in with a set of other young men very like him, for a year he knew what it is to live a completely privileged life with complete enjoyment of it. The brilliant intensity of that enjoyment stood against the dark background of the war in Yeowe, the slave revolution on the colony planet, which had gone on all his lifetime, and was now intensifying. Without that background, he could not have been so happy. A whole life of games and diversions had no interest for him; and when his orders came, posted as a pilot and division commander to Yeowe, his happiness was pretty nearly complete.

He went home for his thirty-day leave. Having received his parents' approbation, he rode over the hills to Rega Toebawe's estate and asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. The rega and his wife told their daughter that they approved his offer and asked her, for they were not strict parents, if she would like to marry Teyeo. "Yes," she said. As a grown, unmarried woman, she lived in seclusion in the women's side of the house, but she and Teyeo were allowed to meet and even to walk together, the chaperone remaining at some distance. Teyeo told her it was a three-year posting; would she marry in haste now, or wait three years and have a proper wedding? "Now," she said, bending down her narrow, shining face. Teyeo gave a laugh of delight, and she laughed at him. They were married nine days later—it couldn't be sooner, there had to be some fuss and ceremony, even if it was a soldier's wedding—and for seventeen days Teyeo and Emdu made love, walked together, made love, rode together, made love, came to know each other, came to love each other, quarreled, made up, made love, slept in each other's arms. Then he left for the war on another world, and she moved to the women's side of her husband's house.

His three-year posting was extended year by year, as his value as an officer was recognized and as the war on Yeowe changed from scattered containing actions to an increasingly desperate retreat. In his seventh year of service an order for compassionate leave was sent out to Yeowe Headquarters for Rega Teyeo, whose wife was dying of complications of berlot fever. At that point, there was no headquarters on Yeowe; the Army was retreating from three directions toward the old colonial capital; Teyeo's division was fighting a rear-guard defense in the sea-marshes; communications had collapsed.

Command on Werel continued to find it inconceivable that a mass of ignorant slaves with the crudest kind of weapons could be defeating the Army of Voe Deo, a disciplined, trained body of soldiers with an infallible communications network, skimmers, pods, every armament and device permitted by the Ekumenical Convention Agreement. A strong faction in Voe Deo blamed the setbacks on this submissive adherence to alien rules. The hell with Ekumenical Conventions. Bomb the damned brownies back to the mud they were made of. Use the biobomb, what was it for, anyway? Get our men off the foul planet and wipe it clean. Start fresh. If we don't win the war on Yeowe, the next revolution's going to be right here on Werel, in our own cities, in our own homes! The jittery government held on against this pressure. Werel was on probation, and Voe Deo wanted to lead the planet to Ekumenical status. Defeats were minimized, losses were not made up, skimmers, pods, weapons, men were not replaced. By the end of Teyeo's seventh year, the Army on Yeowe had been essentially written off by its government. Early in the eighth year, when the Ekumen was at last permitted to send its Envoys to Yeowe, Voe Deo and the other countries that had supplied auxiliary troops finally began to bring their soldiers home.

It was not until he got back to Werel that Teyeo learned his wife was dead.

He went home to Noeha. He and his father greeted each other with a silent embrace, but his mother wept as she embraced him. He knelt to her in apology for having brought her more grief than she could bear.

He lay that night in the cold room in the silent house, listening to his heart beat like a slow drum. He was not unhappy, the relief of being at peace and the sweetness of being home were too great for that; but it was a desolate calm, and somewhere in it was anger. Not used to anger, he was not sure what he felt. It was as if a faint, sullen red flare colored every image in his mind, as he lay trying to think through the seven years on Werel, first as a pilot, then the ground war, then the long retreat, the killing and the being killed. Why had they been left there to be hunted down and slaughtered? Why had the government not sent them reinforcements? The questions had not been worth asking then, they were not worth asking now. They had only one answer: We do what they ask us to do, and we don't complain. I fought every step of the way, he thought, without pride. The new knowledge sliced keen as a knife through all other knowledge—And while I was fighting, she was dying. All a waste, there on Yeowe. All a waste, here on Werel. He sat up in the dark, the cold, silent, sweet dark of night in the hills. "Lord Kamye," he said aloud, "help me. My mind betrays me."

During the long leave home he sat often with his mother. She wanted to talk about Emdu, and at first he had to force himself to listen. It would be easy to forget the girl he had known for seventeen days seven years ago, if only his mother would let him forget. Gradually he learned to take what she wanted to give him, the knowledge of who his wife had been. His mother wanted to share all she could with him of the joy she had had in Emdu, her beloved child and friend. Even his father, retired now, a quenched, silent man, was able to say, "She was the light of the house." They were thanking him for her. They were telling him that it had not all been a waste.

But what lay ahead of them? Old age, the empty house. They did not complain, of course, and seemed content in their severe, placid round of daily work; but for them the continuity of the past with the future was broken.

"I should remarry," Teyeo said to his mother. "Is there anyone you've noticed . . .?"

It was raining, a grey light through the wet windows, a soft thrumming on the eaves. His mother's face was indistinct as she bent to her mending.

"No," she said. "Not really." She looked up at him, and after a pause asked, "What . . . where do you think you'll be posted?"

"I don't know."

"There's no war now," she said, in her soft, even voice.

"No," Teyeo said. "There's no war."

"Will there be . . . ever? do you think?"

He stood up, walked down the room and back, sat down again on the cushioned platform near her; they both sat straightbacked, still except for the slight motion of her hands as she sewed; his hands lay lightly one in the other, as he had been taught when he was two.

"I don't know," he said. "It's strange. It's as if there hadn't been a war. As if we'd never been in Yeowe—the Colony, the Uprising, all of it. They don't talk about it. It didn't happen. We don't fight wars. This is a new age; they say that often on the net. The age of peace, brotherhood across the stars. So, are we brothers with Yeowe, now? Are we brothers with Gatay and Bambur and the Forty States? Are we brothers with our assets? I can't make sense of it; I don't know what they mean. I don't know where I fit in." His voice too was quiet and even.

"Not here, I think," she said. "Not yet."

After a while he said, "I thought . . . children . . ."

"Of course. When the time comes." She smiled at him. "You never could sit still for half an hour . . . Wait. Wait and see."

She was right, of course; and yet what he saw on the net and in town tried his patience and his pride. It seemed that to be a soldier now was a disgrace. Government reports, the news and the analyses, constantly referred to the army and particularly the veot class as fossils, costly and useless, Voe Deo's principal obstacle to full admission to the Ekumen. His own uselessness was made clear to him when his request for a posting was met by an indefinite extension of his leave on half pay. At thirty-two, they appeared to be telling him, he was superannuated.

Again he suggested to his mother that he should accept the situation, settle down, and look for a wife. "Talk to your father," she said. He did so; his father said, "Of course your help is welcome, but I can run the farm well enough for a while yet. Your mother thinks you should go to the capital, to Command. They can't ignore you if you're there. After all. After seven years' combat—your record—"

Teyeo knew what that was worth, now. But he was certainly not needed here, and probably irritated his father with his ideas of changing this or that way things were done. They were right, he should go to the capital and find out for himself what part he could play in the new world of peace.

His first halfyear there was grim. He knew almost no one at Command or in the barracks; his generation was dead, or invalided out, or home on half pay. The younger officers, who had not been in Yeowe, seemed to him a cold, buttoned-up lot, always talking money and politics; little businessmen, he privately thought them. He knew they were afraid of him—of his record, of his reputation; whether he wanted to or not he reminded them that there had been a war that Werel had fought and lost; a civil war; their own race fighting against itself, class against class. They wanted to dismiss it as a meaningless quarrel on another world, nothing to do with them.

Teyeo walked the streets of the capital, watched the thousands of bondsmen and bondswomen hurrying about their owners' business, and wondered what they were waiting for.

"The Ekumen does not interfere with the social, cultural, or economic arrangements and affairs of any people," the Embassy and the government spokesmen repeated. "Full membership for any nation or people that wishes it is contingent only on absence, or renunciation, of certain specific methods and devices of warfare," and there followed the list of terrible weapons, most of them mere names to Teyeo, but a few of them inventions of his own country: the biobomb, as they called it, and the neuronics.

He personally agreed with the Ekumen's judgment on such devices, and respected their patience in waiting for Voe Deo and the rest of the Werel to prove not only compliance with the ban, but acceptance of the principle. But he very deeply resented their condescension. They sat in judgment on everything Werelian, viewing from above. The less they said about the division of classes, the clearer their disapproval was. "Slavery is of very rare occurrence in Ekumenical worlds," said their books, "and disappears completely with full participation in the Ekumenical policy." Was that what the Alien Embassy was really waiting for?

"By our Lady!" said one of the young officers—many of them were Tualites, as well as businessmen—"the Aliens are going to admit the muddies before they admit us!" He was sputtering with indignant rage, like a redfaced old rega faced with an insolent bondsoldier. "Yeowe—a damned planet of savages, tribesmen, regressed into barbarism—preferred over us!"

"They fought well," Teyeo observed, knowing he should not say it as he said it, but not liking to hear the men and women he had fought against called muddies. Assets, rebels, enemies, yes.

The young man stared at him and after a moment said, "I suppose you love 'em, eh? The muddies?"

"I killed as many as I could," Teyeo replied politely, and then changed the conversation; the young man, though nominally Teyeo's superior at Command, was an oga, the lowest rank of veot, and to snub him further would be illbred.

They were stuffy, he was touchy; the old days of cheerful good fellowship were a faint, incredible memory. The bureau chiefs at Command listened to his request to be put back on active service and sent him endlessly on to another department. He could not live in barracks, but had to find an apartment, like a civilian. His half pay did not permit him indulgence in the expensive pleasures of the city. While waiting for appointments to see this or that official, he spent his days in the library net of the Officers Academy. He knew his education had been incomplete and was out of date. If his country was going to join the Ekumen, in order to be useful he must know more about the Alien ways of thinking and the new technologies. Not sure what he needed to know, he floundered about in the network, bewildered by the endless information available, increasingly aware that he was no intellectual and no scholar and would never understand Alien minds, but doggedly driving himself on out of his depth.

A man from the Embassy was offering an introductory course in Ekumenical history in the public net. Teyeo joined it, and sat through eight or ten lecture and discussion periods, straight-backed and still, only his hands moving slightly as he took full and methodical notes. The lecturer, a Hainishman who translated his extremely long Hainish name as Old Music, watched Teyeo, tried to draw him out in discussion, and at last asked him to stay in after session. "I should like to meet you, Rega," he said, when the others had dropped out.

They met at a cafe. They met again. Teyeo did not like the Alien's manners, which he found effusive; he did not trust his quick, clever mind; he felt Old Music was using him, studying him as a specimen of The Veot, The Soldier, probably The Barbarian. The Alien, secure in his superiority, was indifferent to Teyeo's coldness, ignored his distrust, insisted on helping him with information and guidance, and shamelessly repeated questions Teyeo had avoided answering. One of these was, "Why are you sitting around here on half pay?"

"It's not by my own choice, Mr. Old Music," Teyeo finally answered, the third time it was asked; he was very angry at the man's impudence, and so spoke with particular mildness. He kept his eyes away from Old Music's eyes, bluish, with the whites showing like a scared horse. He could not get used to Aliens' eyes.

"They won't put you back on active service?"

Teyeo assented politely. Could the man, however alien, really be oblivious to the fact that his questions were grossly humiliating?

"Would you be willing to serve in the Embassy Guard?"

That question left Teyeo speechless for a moment; then he committed the extreme rudeness of answering a question with a question. "Why do you ask?"

"I'd like very much to have a man of your capacity in that corps," said

Old Music, adding with his appalling candor, "Most of them are spies or blockheads. It would be wonderful to have a man I knew was neither. It's not just sentry-duty, you know. I imagine you'd be asked by your government to give information; that's to be expected. And we would use you, once you had experience and if you were willing, as a liaison officer. Here or in other countries. We would not, however, ask you to give information to us. Am I clear, Teyeo? I want no misunderstanding between us as to what I am and am not asking of you."

"You would be able . . .?" Teyeo asked cautiously.

Old Music laughed and said, "Yes. I have a string to pull in your Command. A favor owed. Will you think it over?"

Teyeo was silent a minute. He had been nearly a year now in the capital and his requests for posting had met only bureaucratic evasion and, recently, hints that they were considered insubordinate. "I'll accept now, if I may," he said, with a cold deference.

The Hainishman looked at him, his smile changing to a thoughtful, steady gaze. "Thank you," he said. "You should hear from Command in a few days."

So Teyeo put his uniform back on, moved back to the City Barracks, and served for another seven years on alien ground. The Ekumenical Embassy was, by diplomatic agreement, a part not of Werel but of the Ekumen—a piece of the planet that no longer belonged to it. The Guardsmen furnished by Voe Deo were protective and decorative, a highly visible presence on the Embassy grounds in their white and gold dress uniform. They were also visibly armed, since protest against the Alien presence still broke out erratically in violence.

Rega Teyeo, at first assigned to command a troop of these guards, soon was transferred to a different duty, that of accompanying members of the Embassy staff about the city and on journeys. He served as a bodyguard, in undress uniform. The Embassy much preferred not to use their own people and weapons, but to request and trust Voe Deo to protect them. Often he was also called upon to be a guide and interpreter, and sometimes a companion. He did not like it when visitors from somewhere in space wanted to be chummy and confiding, asked him about himself, invited him to come drinking with them. With perfectly concealed distaste, with perfect civility, he refused such offers. He did his job and kept his distance. He knew that that was precisely what the Embassy valued him for. Their confidence in him gave him a cold satisfaction.

His own government had never approached him to give information, though he certainly learned things that would have interested them. Voe Dean intelligence did not recruit their agents among veots. He knew who the agents in the Embassy Guard were; some of them tried to get information from him, but he had no intention of spying for spies.

Old Music, whom he now surmised to be the head of the Embassy's intelligence system, called him in on his return from a winter leave at home. The Hainishman had learned not to make emotional demands on Teyeo, but could not hide a note of affection in his voice greeting him.

"Hullo, Rega! I hope your family's well? Good. I've got a particularly tricky job for you. Kingdom of Gatay. You were there with Kemehan two years ago, weren't you? Well, now they want us to send an Envoy. They say they want to join. Of course the old king's a puppet of your government; but there's a lot else going on there. A strong religious separatist movement. A Patriotic Cause, kick out all the foreigners, Voe Deans and Aliens alike. But the king and council requested an Envoy, and all we've got to send them is a new arrival. She may give you some problems till she learns the ropes. I judge her a bit headstrong. Excellent material, but young, very young. And she's only been here a few weeks. I requested you, because she needs your experience. Be patient with her, Rega. I think you'll find her likeable."

He did not. In seven years he had got accustomed to the Aliens' eyes and their various smells and colors and manners; protected by his flawless courtesy and his stoical code, he endured or ignored their strange or shocking or troubling behavior, their ignorance and their different knowledge. Serving and protecting the foreigners entrusted to him, he kept himself aloof from them, neither touched nor touching. His charges learned to count on him and not to presume on him. Women were often quicker to see and respond to his Keep Out signs than men; he had an easy, almost friendly relationship with an old Terran Observer whom he had accompanied on several long investigatory tours. "You are as peaceful to be with as a cat, Rega," she told him once, and he valued the compliment. But the Envoy to Gatay was another matter.

She was physically splendid, with clear redbrown skin like that of a baby, glossy swinging hair, a free walk—too free: she flaunted her ripe, slender body at men who had no access to it, thrusting it at him, at everyone, insistent, shameless. She expressed her opinion on everything with coarse self-confidence. She could not hear a hint and refused to take an order. She was an aggressive, spoiled child with the sexuality of an adult, given the responsibility of a diplomat in a dangerously unstable country. Teyeo knew as soon as he met her that this was an impossible assignment. He could not trust her or himself. Her sexual immodesty aroused him as it disgusted him; she was a whore whom he must treat as a princess. Forced to endure and unable to ignore her, he hated her.

He was more familiar with anger than he had used to be, but not used to hating. It troubled him extremely. He had never in his life asked for a reposting, but on the morning after she had taken the makil into her room, he sent a stiff little appeal to the Embassy. Old Music responded to him with a sealed voice-message through the diplomatic link: "Love of god and country is like fire, a wonderful friend, a terrible enemy; only children play with fire. I don't like the situation. There's nobody here I can replace either of you with. Will you hang on a while longer?"

He did not know how to refuse. A veot did not refuse duty. He was ashamed at having even thought of doing so, and hated her again for causing him that shame.

The first sentence of the message was enigmatic, not in Old Music's usual style but flowery, indirect, like a coded warning. Teyeo of course knew none of the intelligence codes either of his country or of the Ekumen. Old Music would have to use hints and indirection with him. "Love of god and country" could well mean the Old Believers and the Patriots, the two subversive groups in Gatay, both of them fanatically opposed to foreign influence; the Envoy could be the child playing with fire. Was she being approached by one group or the other? He had seen no evidence of it, unless the man in the shadows that night had been not a knifeman but a messenger. She was under his eyes all day, her house watched all night by soldiers under his command. Surely the makil, Batikam, was not acting for either of those groups. He might well be a member of Hame, the asset liberation underground of Voe Deo, but as such would not endanger the Envoy, since the Hame saw the Ekumen as their ticket to Yeowe and to freedom.

Teyeo puzzled over the words, replaying them over and over, knowing his own stupidity faced with this kind of subtlety, the ins and outs of the political labyrinth. At last he erased the message and yawned, for it was late; bathed, lay down, turned off the light, said under his breath, "Lord Kamye, let me hold with courage to the one noble thing!" and slept like a stone.

The makil came to her house every night after the theater. Teyeo tried to tell himself there was nothing wrong in it. He himself had spent nights with the makils, back in the palmy days before the war. Expert, artistic sex was part of their business. He knew by hearsay that rich city women often hired them to come supply a husband's deficiencies. But even such women did so secretly, discreetly, not in this vulgar, shameless way, utterly careless of decency, flouting the moral code, as if she had some kind of right to do whatever she wanted wherever and whenever she wanted it. Of course Batikam colluded eagerly with her, playing on her infatuation, mocking the Gatayans, mocking Teyeo—and mocking her, though she didn't know it. What a chance for an asset to make fools of all the owners at once!

Watching Batikam, Teyeo felt sure he was a member of Hame. His mockery was very subtle; he was not trying to disgrace the Envoy. Indeed his discretion was far greater than hers. He was trying to keep her from disgracing herself. The makil returned Teyeo's cold courtesy in kind, but once or twice their eyes met and some brief, involuntary understanding passed between them, fraternal, ironic.

There was to be a public festival, an observation of the Tualite Feast of Forgiveness, to which the Envoy was pressingly invited by the King and Council. She was put on show at many such events. Teyeo thought nothing about it except how to provide security in an excited holiday crowd, until San told him that the festival day was the highest holy day of the old religion of Gatay, and that the Old Believers fiercely resented the imposition of the foreign rites over their own. The little man seemed genuinely worried. Teyeo worried too when, next day, San was suddenly replaced by an elderly man who spoke little but Gatayan and was quite unable to explain what had become of San Ubattat. "Other duties, other duties call," he said in very bad VoeDean, smiling and bobbing, "very great relishes time, aha? Relishes duties call."

During the days that preceded the festival tension rose in the city; graffiti appeared, symbols of the old religion smeared across the walls; a Tualite temple was desecrated, after which the Royal Guard was much in evidence in the streets. Teyeo went to the palace and requested, on his own authority, that the Envoy not be asked to appear in public during a ceremony that was "likely to be troubled by inappropriate demonstrations." He was called in and treated by a Court official with a mixture of dismissive insolence and conniving nods and winks, which left him really uneasy. He left four men on duty at the Envoy's house that night. Returning to his quarters, a little barracks down the street which had been handed over to the Embassy Guard, he found the window of his room open and a scrap of writing, in his own language, on his table: *Fest F is set up for assasnation.*

He was at the Envoy's house promptly the next morning and asked her asset to tell her he must speak to her. She came out of her bedroom pulling a white wrap around her naked body. Batikam followed her, half-dressed, sleepy, and amused. Teyeo gave him the eye-signal *go*, which he received with a serene, patronizing smile, murmuring to the woman, "I'll go have some breakfast. Rewe? have you got something to feed me?" He followed the bondswoman out of the room. Teyeo faced the Envoy and held out the scrap of paper.

"I received this last night, ma'am," he said. "I must ask you not to attend the festival tomorrow."

She considered the paper, read the writing, and yawned. "Who's it from?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"What's it mean? *Assassination?* They can't spell, can they?"

After a moment, he said, "There are a number of other indications—enough that I must ask you—"

"Not to attend the festival of Forgiveness, yes. I heard you." She went to a windowseat and sat down, her robe falling wide to reveal her legs; her bare, brown feet were short and supple, the soles pink, the toes small and orderly. Teyeo looked fixedly at the air beside her head. She twiddled the bit of paper. "If you think it's dangerous, Rega, bring a guardsman or two with you," she said, with the faintest tone of scorn. "I really have to be there. The King requested it, you know. And I'm to light the big fire, or something. One of the few things women are allowed to do in public here . . . . I can't back out of it." She held out the paper, and after a moment he came close enough to take it. She looked up at him smiling; when she defeated him she always smiled at him. "Who do you think would want to blow me away, anyhow? The Patriots?"

"Or the Old Believers, ma'am. Tomorrow is one of their holidays."

"And your Tualites have taken it away from them? Well, they can't exactly blame the Ekumen, can they?"

"I think it possible that the government might permit violence in order to excuse retaliation, ma'am."

She started to answer carelessly, realized what he had said, and frowned. "You think the Council's setting me up? What evidence have you?"

After a pause he said, "Very little, ma'am. San Ubattat—"

"San's been ill. The old fellow they sent isn't much use, but he's scarcely dangerous! Is that all?" He said nothing, and she went on, "Until you have real evidence, Rega, don't interfere with my obligations. Your militaristic paranoia isn't acceptable when it spreads to the people I'm dealing with here. Control it, please! I'll expect an extra guardsman or two tomorrow; and that's enough."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and went out. His head sang with anger. It occurred to him now that her new guide had told him San Ubattat had been kept away by religious duties, not by illness. He did not turn back. What was the use? "Stay on for an hour or so, will you, Seyem?" he said to the guard at her gate, and strode off down the street, trying to walk away from her, from her soft brown thighs and the pink soles of her feet and her stupid, insolent, whorish voice giving him orders. He tried to let the bright icy sunlit air, the stepped streets snapping with banners for the festival, the glitter of the great mountains and the clamor of the markets fill him, dazzle and distract him; but he walked seeing his own shadow fall in front of him like a knife across the stones, knowing the futility of his life.

"The veot looked worried," Batikam said in his velvet voice, and she laughed, spearing a preserved fruit from the dish and popping it, dripping, into his mouth.

"I'm ready for breakfast now, Rewe," she called, and sat down across from Batikam. "I'm starving! He was having one of his phallocratic fits. He hasn't saved me from anything lately. It's his only function, after all. So he has to invent occasions. I wish, I wish he was out of my hair. It's so nice not to have poor little old San crawling around like some kind of pubic infestation. If only I could get rid of the Major now!"

"He's a man of honor," the makil said; his tone did not seem ironical.

"How can an owner of slaves be an honorable man?"

Batikam watched her from his long, dark eyes. She could not read Werelian eyes, beautiful as they were, filling their lids with darkness.

"Male hierarchy members always yatter about their precious honor," she said. "And 'their' women's honor, of course."

"Honor is a great privilege," Batikam said. "I envy it. I envy him."

"Oh, the hell with all that phony dignity, it's just pissing to mark your territory. All you need envy him, Batikam, is his freedom."

He smiled. "You're the only person I've ever known who was neither owned nor owner. That is freedom. *That* is freedom. I wonder if you know it?"

"Of course I do," she said. He smiled, and went on eating his breakfast, but there had been something in his voice she had not heard before. Moved and a little troubled, she said after a while, "You're going away soon."

"Mind-reader. Yes. In ten days, the troupe goes on to tour the Forty States."

"Oh, Batikam, I'll miss you! You're the only man, the only person here I can talk to—let alone the sex—"

"Did we ever?"

"Not often," she said, laughing, but her voice shook a little. He held out his hand; she came to him and sat on his lap, the robe dropping open. "Little pretty Envoy breasts," he said, lipping and stroking, "little soft Envoy belly . . . ." Rewe came in with a tray and softly set it down. "Eat your breakfast, little Envoy," Batikam said, and she disengaged herself and returned to her chair, grinning.

"Because you're free you can be honest," he said, fastidiously peeling a pinifruit. "Don't be too hard on those of us who aren't and can't." He cut a slice and fed it to her across the table. "It has been a taste of freedom to know you," he said. "A hint, a shadow . . ."

"In a few years at most, Batikam, you *will* be free. This whole idiotic structure of masters and slaves will collapse completely when Werel comes into the Ekumen."

"If it does."

"Of course it will."

He shrugged. "My home is Yeowe," he said.

She stared, confused. "You come from Yeowe?"

"I've never been there," he said, "I'll probably never go there. What use have they got for makils? But it is my home. Those are my people. That is my freedom. When will you see . . . ." His fist was clenched; he opened it with a soft gesture of letting something go. He smiled and returned to his breakfast. "I've got to get back to the theater," he said, "we're rehearsing an act for the Day of Forgiveness."

She wasted all day at court. She had made persistent attempts to obtain permission to visit the mines and the huge government-run farms on the far side of the mountains, from which Gatay's wealth flowed; she had been as persistently foiled—by the protocol and bureaucracy of the government, she had thought at first, their unwillingness to let a diplomat do anything but run round to meaningless events; but some businessmen had let something slip about conditions in the mines and on the farms that made her think they might be hiding a more brutal kind of slavery than any visible in the capital. Today she got nowhere, waiting for appointments that had not been made. The old fellow who was standing in for San misunderstood most of what she said in VoeDean, and when she tried to speak Gatayan he misunderstood it all, through stupidity or intent. The Major was blessedly absent most of the morning, replaced by one of his soldiers, but turned up at court, stiff and silent and set-jawed, and attended her until she gave up and went home for an early bath.

Batikam came late that night. In the middle of one of the elaborate fantasy games and role-reversals she had learned from him and found so exciting, his caresses grew slower and slower, soft, dragging across her like feathers, so that she shivered with unappeased desire and, pressing her body against his, realized that he had gone to sleep. "Wake up," she said, laughing and yet chilled, and shook him a little. The dark eyes opened, bewildered, full of fear.

"I'm sorry," she said at once, "go back to sleep, you're tired. No, no, it's all right, it's late." But he went on with what she now, whatever his skill and tenderness, had to see was his job.

In the morning at breakfast she said, "Can you see me as an equal, do you, Batikam?"

He looked tired, older than he usually did. He did not smile. After a while he said, "What do you want me to say?"

"That you do."

"I do," he said quietly.

"You don't trust me," she said, bitter.

After a while he said, "This is Forgiveness Day. The Lady Tual came to the men of Asdok, who had set their hunting cats upon her followers. She came among them riding on a great hunting cat with a fiery tongue, and they fell down in terror, but she blessed them, forgiving them." His voice and hands enacted the story as he told it. "Forgive me," he said.

"You don't need any forgiveness!"

"Oh, we all do. It's why we Kamyites borrow the Lady Tual now and then. When we need her. So, today you'll be the Lady Tual, at the rites?"

"All I have to do is light a fire, they said," she said anxiously, and he laughed. When he left she told him she would come to the theater to see him, tonight, after the festival.

The horse-race course, the only flat area of any size anywhere near the city, was thronged, vendors calling, banners waving; the Royal motorcars drove straight into the crowd, which parted like water and closed behind. Some rickety-looking bleachers had been erected for lords and owners, with a curtained section for ladies. She saw a motorcar drive up to the bleachers; a figure swathed in red cloth was bundled out of it and hurried between the curtains, vanishing. Were there peepholes for them to watch the ceremony through? There were women in the crowds, but bondswomen only, assets. She realized that she, too, would be kept hidden until her moment of the ceremony arrived: a red tent awaited her, alongside the bleachers, not far from the roped enclosure where priests were chanting. She was rushed out of the car and into the tent by obsequious and determined courtiers.

Bondswomen in the tent offered her tea, sweets, mirrors, makeup, and hair-oil, and helped her put on the complex swathing of fine red and yellow cloth, her costume for her brief enactment of Lady Tual. Nobody had told her very clearly what she was to do, and to her questions the women said, "The priests will show you, Lady, you just go with them. You just light the fire. They have it all ready." She had the impression that they knew no more than she did; they were pretty girls, court assets, excited at being part of the show, indifferent to the religion. She knew the symbolism of the fire she was to light; into it faults and transgressions could be cast and burnt up, forgotten. It was a nice idea.

The priests were whooping it up out there; she peeked out—there were indeed peepholes in the tent fabric—and saw the crowd had thickened. Nobody except in the bleachers and right against the enclosure ropes could possibly see anything, but everybody was waving red and yellow banners, munching fried food, and making a day of it, while the priests kept up their deep chanting. In the far right of the little, blurred field of vision through the peephole was a familiar arm: the Major's, of course. They had not let him get into the motorcar with her. He must have been furious. He had got here, though, and stationed himself on guard. "Lady, Lady," the court girls were saying, "here come the priests now," and they buzzed around her making sure her headdress was on straight and the damnable, hobbling skirts fell in the right folds. They were still plucking and patting as she stepped out of the tent, dazzled by the daylight, smiling and trying to hold herself very straight and dignified as a Goddess ought to do; she really didn't want to fuck up their ceremony.

Two men in priestly regalia were waiting for her right outside the tent door. They stepped forward immediately, taking her by the elbows and saying, "This way, this way, Lady." Evidently she really wouldn't have to figure out what to do. No doubt they considered women incapable of it, but in the circumstances it was a relief. The priests hurried her along faster than she could comfortably walk in the tight-drawn skirt. They were behind the bleachers now; wasn't the enclosure in the other direction? A car was coming straight at them, scattering the few people who were in its way. Somebody was shouting; the priests suddenly began yanking her, trying to run; one of them yelled and let go her arm, felled by a flying darkness that had hit him with a jolt—she was in the middle of a melee, unable to break the iron hold on her arm, legs imprisoned in the skirt, and there was a noise, an enormous noise, that hit her head and bent it down, she couldn't see or hear, blinded, struggling, shoved face first into some dark place with her face pressed into a stifling, scratchy darkness and her arms held locked behind her.

A car, moving. A long time. Men, talking low. They talked in Gatayan. It was very hard to breathe. She did not struggle; it was no use. They had taped her arms and legs, bagged her head. After a long time she was hauled out like a corpse and carried quickly, indoors, down stairs, set down on a bed or couch, not roughly though with the same desperate haste. She lay still. The men talked, still almost in whispers. It made no sense to her. Her head was still hearing that enormous noise, had it been real? had she been struck? She felt deaf, as if inside a wall of cotton. The cloth of the bag kept getting stuck on her mouth, sucked against her nostrils as she tried to breathe.

It was plucked off; a man stooping over her turned her so he could untape her arms, then her legs, murmuring as he did so, "Don't to be scared, Lady, we don't to hurt you," in VoeDean. He backed away from her quickly. There were four or five of them; it was hard to see, there was very little light. "To wait here," another said, "everything all right. Just to keep happy." She was trying to sit up, and it made her dizzy. When her head stopped spinning, they were all gone. As if by magic. Just to keep happy.

A small very high room. Dark brick walls, earthy air. The light was from a little biolume plaque stuck on the ceiling, a weak, shadowless glow. Probably quite sufficient for Werelian eyes. Just to keep happy. I have been kidnaped. How about that. She inventoried: the thick mattress she was on; a blanket; a door; a small pitcher and a cup; a drainhole, was it, over in the corner? She swung her legs off the mattress and her feet struck something lying on the floor at the foot of it—she coiled up, peered at the dark mass, the body lying there. A man. The dark uniform, the skin so black she could not see the features, but she knew him. Even here, even here, the Major was with her.

She stood up unsteadily and went to investigate the drainhole, which was simply that, a cement-lined hole in the floor, smelling slightly chemical, slightly foul. Her head hurt, and she sat down on the bed again to massage her arms and ankles, easing the tension and pain and getting herself back into herself by touching and confirming herself, rhythmically, methodically. I have been kidnaped. How about that. Just to keep happy. What about him?

Suddenly knowing that he was dead, she shuddered and held still.

After a while she leaned over slowly, trying to see his face, listening. Again she had the sense of being deaf. She heard no breath. She reached out, sick and shaking, and put the back of her hand against his face. It was cool, cold. But warmth breathed across her fingers, once, again. She crouched on the mattress and studied him. He lay absolutely still, but when she put her hand on his chest she felt the slow heartbeat.

"Teyeo," she said in a whisper. Her voice would not go above a whisper.

She put her hand on his chest again. She wanted to feel that slow, steady beat, the faint warmth; it was reassuring. Just to keep happy.

What else had they said. Just to wait. Yes. That seemed to be the program. Maybe she could sleep. Maybe she could sleep and when she woke up the ransom would have come. Or whatever it was they wanted.

She woke up with the thought that she still had her watch, and after sleepily studying the tiny silver readout for a while decided she had slept three hours; it was still the day of the Festival, too soon for ransom probably, and she wouldn't be able to go to the theater to see the makils tonight. Her eyes had grown accustomed to the low light and when she looked she could see, now, that there was dried blood all over one side of the man's head. Exploring, she found a hot lump like a fist above his temple, and her fingers came away smeared. He had got himself crowned.

That must have been him, launching himself at the priest, the fake priest, all she could remember was a flying shadow and a hard thump and an ooof! like an aiji attack, and then there had been the huge noise that confused everything. She clicked her tongue, tapped the wall, to check her hearing. It seemed to be all right; the wall of cotton had disappeared. Maybe she had been crowned herself? She felt her head, but found no lumps. The man must have a concussion, if he was still out after three hours. How bad? When would the men come back?

She got up and nearly fell over, entangled in the damned Goddess skirts. If only she was in her own clothes, not this fancy dress, three pieces of flimsy stuff you had to have servants to put on you! She got out of the skirt piece, and used the scarf piece to make a kind of tied skirt that came to her knees. It wasn't warm in this basement or whatever it was; it was dank and rather cold. She walked up and down, four steps turn, four steps turn, four steps turn, and did some warmups. They had dumped the man onto the floor. How cold was it? Was shock part of concussion? People in shock needed to be kept warm. She dithered a long time, puzzled at her own indecision, at not knowing what to do. Should she try to heave him up onto the mattress? Was it better not to move him? Where the hell were the men? Was he going to die?

She stooped over him and said sharply, "Rega! Teyeo!" and after a moment he caught his breath.

"Wake up!" She remembered now, she thought she remembered, that it was important not to let concussed people lapse into a coma. Except he already had.

He caught his breath again, and his face changed, came out of the rigid immobility, softened; his eyes opened and closed, blinked, unfocused. "Oh Kamye," he said very softly.

She couldn't believe how glad she was to see him. Just to keep happy. He evidently had a blinding headache, and admitted that he was seeing double. She helped him haul himself up onto the mattress and covered him with the blanket. He asked no questions, and lay mute, lapsing back to sleep soon. Once he was settled she went back to her exercises, and did an hour of them. She looked at her watch. It was two hours later, the same day, the Festival day. It wasn't evening yet. When were the men going to come?

They came early in the morning, after the endless night that was the same as the afternoon and the morning. The metal door was unlocked and thrown clanging open, and one of them came in with a tray while two of them stood with raised, aimed guns in the doorway. There was nowhere to put the tray but the floor, so he shoved it at Solly, said, "Sorry, Lady!" and backed out; the door clanged shut, the bolts banged home. She stood holding the tray. "Wait!" she said.

The man had waked up and was looking groggily around. After finding him in this place with her she had somehow lost his nickname, did not think of him as the Major, yet shied away from his name. "Here's breakfast, I guess," she said, and sat down on the edge of the mattress. A cloth was thrown over the wicker tray; under it was a pile of Gatayan grainrolls stuffed with meat and greens, several pieces of fruit, and a capped water-carafe of thin, fancily beaded metal alloy. "Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, maybe," she said. "Shit. Oh well. It looks good. Can you eat? Can you sit up?"

He worked himself up to sit with his back against the wall, and then shut his eyes.

"You're still seeing double?"

He made a small noise of assent.

"Are you thirsty?"

Small noise of assent.

"Here." She passed him the cup. By holding it in both hands he got it to his mouth, and drank the water slowly, a swallow at a time. She meanwhile devoured three grainrolls one after the other, then forced herself to stop, and ate a pinifruit. "Could you eat some fruit?" she asked him, feeling guilty. He did not answer. She thought of Batikam feeding her the slice of pini at breakfast, when, yesterday, a hundred years ago.

The food in her stomach made her feel sick. She took the cup from the man's relaxed hand—he was asleep again—and poured herself water, and drank it slowly, a swallow at a time.

When she felt better she went to the door and explored its hinges, lock, and surface. She felt and peered around the brick walls, the poured concrete floor, seeking she knew not what, something to escape with, something . . . . She should do exercises. She forced herself to do some, but the queasiness returned, and a lethargy with it. She went back to the mattress and sat down. After a while she found she was crying. After a while she found she had been asleep. She needed to piss. She squatted over the hole and listened to her urine fall into it. There was nothing to clean herself with. She came back to the bed and sat down on it, stretching out her legs, holding her ankles in her hands. It was utterly silent.

She turned to look at the man; he was watching her. It made her start. He looked away at once. He still lay half propped up against the wall, uncomfortably, but relaxed.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked.

"Thank you," he said. Here where nothing was familiar and time was broken off from the past, his soft, light voice was welcome in its familiarity. She poured him a cup full and gave it to him. He managed it much more steadily, sitting up to drink. "Thank you," he whispered again, giving her back the cup.

"How's your head?"

He put his hand to the swelling, winced, and sat back.

"One of them had a stick," she said, seeing it in a flash in the jumble of her memories—"a priest's staff. You jumped the other one."

"They took my gun," he said. "Festival." He kept his eyes closed.

"I got tangled in those damn clothes. I couldn't help you at all. Listen. Was there a noise, an explosion?"

"Yes. Diversion, maybe."

"Who do you think these boys are?"

"Revolutionaries. Or . . ."

"You said you thought the Gatayan government was in on it."

"I don't know," he murmured.

"You were right, I was wrong, I'm sorry," she said with a sense of virtue at remembering to make amends.

He moved his hand very slightly in an it-doesn't-matter gesture.

"Are you still seeing double?"

He did not answer; he was phasing out again.

She was standing, trying to remember Selish breathing exercises, when the door crashed and clanged, and the same three men were there, two with guns, all young, black-skinned, short-haired, very nervous. The lead one stooped to set a tray down on the floor, and without the least premeditation Solly stepped on his hand and brought her weight down on it. "You wait!" she said. She was staring straight into the faces and gun-muzzles of the other two. "Just wait a moment, listen! He has a head injury, we need a doctor, we need more water, I can't even clean his wound, there's no toilet paper, who the hell are you people anyway?"

The one she had stomped was shouting, "Get off! Lady to get off my hand!" but the others heard her. She lifted her foot and got out of his way as he came up fast, backing into his buddies with the guns. "All right, lady, we are sorry to have trouble," he said, tears in his eyes, cradling his hand. "We are Patriots. You send messish to this Pretender, like our messish. Nobody is to hurt. All right?" He kept backing up, and one of the gunmen swung the door to. Crash, rattle.

She drew a deep breath and turned. Teyeo was watching her. "That was dangerous," he said, smiling very slightly.

"I know it was," she said, breathing hard. "It was stupid. I can't get hold of myself. I feel like pieces of me. But they shove stuff in and run, damn it! We have to have some water!" She was in tears, the way she always was for a moment after violence or a quarrel. "Let's see, what have they brought this time." She lifted the tray up onto the mattress; like the other, in a ridiculous semblance of service in a hotel or a house with slaves, it was covered with a cloth. "All the comforts," she murmured. Under the cloth was a heap of sweet pastries, a little plastic handmirror, a comb, a tiny pot of something that smelled like decayed flowers, and a box of what she identified after a while as Gatayan tampons.

"It's things for the lady," she said. "God damn them, the stupid God-damn pricks! A mirror!" She flung the thing across the room. "Of course I can't last a day without looking in the mirror! God *damn* them!" She flung everything else but the pastries after the mirror, knowing as she did so that she would pick up the tampons and keep them under the mattress and, oh, God forbid, use them if she had to, if they had to stay here, how long would it be? ten days or more—"Oh, God," she said again. She got up and picked everything up, put the mirror and the little pot, the empty water jug and the fruit-skins from the last meal, onto one of the trays and set it beside the door. "Garbage," she said in VoeDean. Her outburst, she realized, had been in another language; Alterran, probably. "Have you any idea," she said, sitting down on the mattress again, "how hard you people make it to be a woman? You could turn a woman against being one!"

"I think they meant well," Teyeo said. She realized that there was not the faintest shade of mockery, even of amusement in his voice. If he was enjoying her shame, he was ashamed to show her that he was. "I think they're amateurs," he said.

After a while she said, "That could be bad."

"It might." He had sat up and was gingerly feeling the knot on his head. His coarse, heavy hair was blood-caked all around it. "Kidnaping," he said. "Ransom demands. Not assassins. They didn't have guns. Couldn't have got in with guns. I had to give up mine."

"You mean these aren't the ones you were warned about?"

"I don't know." His explorations caused him a shiver of pain, and he desisted. "Are we very short of water?"

She brought him another cup full. "Too short for washing. A stupid God-damn mirror when what we need is water!"

He thanked her and drank and sat back, nursing the last swallows in the cup. "They didn't plan to take me," he said.

She thought about it and nodded. "Afraid you'd identify them?"

"If they had a place for me they wouldn't put me in with a lady." He spoke without irony. "They had this ready for you. It must be somewhere in the city."

She nodded. "The car ride was half an hour or less. My head was in a bag, though."

"They've sent a message to the Palace. They got no reply, or an unsatisfactory one. They want a message from you."

"To convince the government they really have me? Why do they need convincing?"

They were both silent.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I can't think." He lay back. Feeling tired, low, edgy after her adrenaline rush, she lay down alongside him. She had rolled up the Goddess' skirt to make a pillow; he had none. The blanket lay across their legs.

"Pillow," she said. "More blankets. Soap. What else?"

"Key," he murmured.

They lay side by side in the silence and the faint unvarying light.

Next morning about eight, according to Solly's watch, the Patriots came into the room, four of them; two stood on guard at the door with their guns ready; the other two stood uncomfortably in what floor space was left, looking down at their captives, both of whom sat crosslegged on the mattress. The new spokesman spoke better VoeDean than the others. He said they were very sorry to cause the lady discomfort and would do what they could to make it comfortable for her, and she must be patient and write a message by hand to the Pretender King, explaining that she would be set free unharmed as soon as the King commanded the Council to rescind their treaty with Voe Deo.

"He won't," she said. "They won't let him."

"Please do not discuss," the man said with frantic harshness. "This is writing materials. This is the message." He set the papers and a stylo down on the mattress, nervously, as if afraid to get close to her.

She was aware of how Teyeo effaced himself, sitting without a motion, his head lowered, his eyes lowered; the men ignored him.

"If I write this for you I want water, a lot of water, and soap and blankets and toilet paper and pillows and a doctor, and I want somebody to come when I knock on that door, and I want some decent clothes. Warm clothes. Men's clothes."

"No doctor!" the man said. "Write it! Please! Now!" He was jumpy, twitchy, she dared push him no further. She read their statement, copied it out in her large, childish scrawl—she seldom handwrote anything—and handed both to the spokesman. He glanced over it and without a word hurried the other men out. Clash went the door.

"Should I have refused?"

"I don't think so," Teyeo said. He stood up and stretched, but sat down again looking dizzy. "You bargain well," he said.

"We'll see what we get. Oh, God. What is going *on?*"

"Maybe," he said slowly, "Gatay is unwilling to yield to these demands. But when Voe Deo—and your Ekumen—get word of it, they'll put pressure on Gatay."

"I wish they'd get moving. I suppose Gatay is horribly embarrassed, saving face by trying to conceal the whole thing—is that likely? How long can they keep it up? What about your people? Won't they be hunting for you?"

"No doubt," he said, in his polite way.

It was curious how his stiff manner, his manners, which had always shunted her aside, cut her out, here had quite another effect; his restraint and formality reassured her that she was still part of the world outside this room, from which they came and to which they would return, a world where people lived long lives.

What did long life matter? she asked herself, and didn't know. It was nothing she had ever thought about before. But these young Patriots lived in a world of short lives. Demands, violence, immediacy, and death, for what? for a bigotry, a hatred, a rush of power.

"Whenever they leave," she said in a low voice, "I get really frightened."

Teyeo cleared his throat and said, "So do I."

Exercises.

"Take hold—no, take *hold,* I'm not made of glass!—Now—"

"Ha!" he said, with his flashing grin of excitement, as she showed him the break, and he in turn repeated it, breaking from her.

"All right, now you'd be waiting—here"—thump—"see?"

"Ai!"

"I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Teyeo—I didn't think about your head—Are you all right? I'm really sorry—"

"Oh, Kamye," he said, sitting up and holding his black, narrow head between his hands. He drew several deep breaths. She knelt penitent and anxious.

"That's," he said, and breathed some more, "that's not, not fair play."

"No of course it's not, it's aiji—all's fair in love and war, they say that on Terra—Really, I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry, that was so stupid of me!"

He laughed, a kind of broken and desperate laugh, shook his head, shook it again. "Show me," he said. "I don't know what you did."

Exercises.

"What do you do with your mind?"

"Nothing."

"You just let it wander?"

"No. Am I and my mind different beings?"

"So . . . you don't focus on something? You just wander with it?"

"No."

"So you *don't* let it wander."

"Who?" he said, rather testily.

A pause.

"Do you think about—"

"No," he said. "Be still."

A very long pause, maybe a quarter hour.

"Teyeo, I can't. I itch. My mind itches. How long have you been doing this?"

A pause, a reluctant answer: "Since I was two."

He broke his utterly relaxed motionless pose, bent his head to stretch his neck and shoulder muscles. She watched him.

"I keep thinking about long life, about living long," she said. "I don't mean just being alive a long time, hell, I've been alive about eleven hundred years, what does that mean, nothing. I mean . . . Something about thinking of life as long makes a difference. Like having kids does. Even thinking about having kids. It's like it changes some balance. It's funny I keep thinking about that now, when my chances for a long life have kind of taken a steep fall . . . ."

He said nothing. He was able to say nothing in a way that allowed her to go on talking. He was one of the least talkative men she had ever known. Most men were so wordy. She was fairly wordy herself. He was quiet. She wished she knew how to be quiet.

"It's just practice, isn't it?" she asked. "Just sitting there."

He nodded.

"Years and years and years of practice . . . . Oh, God. Maybe . . ."

"No, no," he said, taking her thought immediately.

"But why don't they *do* something? What are they *waiting* for? It's been nine *days!*"

From the beginning, by unplanned, unspoken agreement, the room had been divided in two: the line ran down the middle of the mattress and across to the facing wall. The door was on her side, the left; the shit-hole was on his side, the right. Any invasion of the other's space was requested by some almost invisible cue and permitted the same way. When one of them used the shit-hole the other unobtrusively faced away. When they had enough water to take cat-baths, which was seldom, the same arrangement held. The line down the middle of the mattress was absolute. Their voices crossed it, and the sounds and smells of their bodies. Sometimes she felt his warmth; Werelian body temperature was somewhat higher than hers, and in the dank, still air she felt that faint radiance as he slept. But they never crossed the line, not by a finger, not in the deepest sleep.

Solly thought about this, finding it, in some moments, quite funny. At other moments it seemed stupid and perverse. Couldn't they both use some human comfort? The only time she had touched him was the first day, when she had helped him get onto the mattress, and then when they had enough water she had cleaned his scalp-wound and little by little washed the clotted, stinking blood out of his hair, using the comb, which had after all been a good thing to have, and pieces of the Goddess' skirt, an invaluable source of washcloths and bandages. Then once his head healed, they practiced aiji daily; but aiji had an impersonal, ritual purity to its clasps and grips that was a long way from creature comfort. The rest of the time his bodily presence was clearly, invariably uninvasive and untouchable.

He was only maintaining, under incredibly difficult circumstances, the rigid restraint he had always shown. Not just he, but Rewe too; all of them, all of them but Batikam; and yet was Batikam's instant yielding to her whim and desire the true contact she had thought it? She thought of the fear in his eyes, that last night. Not restraint, but constraint.

It was the mentality of a slave society: slaves and masters caught in the same trap of radical distrust and self-protection.

"Teyeo," she said, "I don't understand slavery. Let me say what I mean," though he had shown no sign of interruption or protest, merely civil attention. "I mean, I do understand how a social institution comes about and how an individual is simply part of it—I'm not saying why don't you agree with me in seeing it as wicked and unprofitable, I'm not asking you to defend it or renounce it. I'm trying to understand what it feels like to believe that two-thirds of the human beings in your world are actually, rightfully your property. Five-sixths, in fact, including women of your caste."

After a while he said, "My family owns about twenty-five assets."

"Don't quibble."

He accepted the reproof.

"It seems to me that you cut off human contact. You don't touch slaves and slaves don't touch you, in the way human beings ought to touch—in mutuality. You have to keep yourselves separate, always working to maintain that boundary. Because it isn't a natural boundary—it's totally artificial, manmade. I can't tell owners and assets apart physically. Can you?"

"Mostly."

"By cultural, behavioral clues—right?"

After thinking a while, he nodded.

"You are the same species, race, people, exactly the same in every way, with a slight selection toward color. If you brought up an asset child as an owner it would *be* an owner in every respect, and vice versa. So you spend your lives keeping up this tremendous division that doesn't exist. What I don't understand is how you can fail to see how appallingly wasteful it is. I don't mean economically!"

"In the war," he said, and then there was a very long pause; though Solly had a lot more to say, she waited, curious. "I was on Yeowe," he said, "you know, in the civil war."

That's where you got all those scars and dents, she thought; for however scrupulously she averted her eyes, it was impossible not to be fairly familiar with his spare, onyx body by now, and she knew that in aiji he had to favor his left arm, which had a considerable chunk out of it just above the bicep.

"The slaves of the Colonies revolted, you know, some of them at first, then all of them. Nearly all. So we Army men there were all owners. We couldn't send asset soldiers, they might defect. We were all veots and volunteers. Owners fighting assets. I was fighting my equals. I learned that pretty soon. Later on I learned I was fighting my superiors. They defeated us."

"But that—" Solly said, and stopped; she did not know what to say.

"They defeated us from beginning to end," he said. "Partly because my government didn't understand that they could. That they fought better and harder and more intelligently and more bravely than we did."

"Because they were fighting for their freedom!"

"Maybe so," he said in his polite way.

"So . . ."

"I wanted to tell you that I respect the people I fought."

"I know so little about war, about fighting," she said, with a mixture of contrition and irritation. "Nothing, really. I was on Kheakh, but that wasn't war, it was racial suicide, mass slaughter of a biosphere. I guess there's a difference . . . . That was when the Ekumen finally decided on the Arms Convention, you know. Because of Kheakh and Orint destroying themselves. The Terrans had been pushing for the Convention for ages. Having nearly committed suicide themselves a while back. I'm half Terran. My ancestors rushed around their planet slaughtering each other. For millennia. They were masters and slaves, too, some of them, a lot of them . . . . But I don't know if the Arms Convention was a good idea. If it's right. Who are we to tell anybody what to do and not to do? The idea of the Ekumen was to offer a way. To open it. Not to bar it to anybody."

He listened intently, but said nothing until after some while. "We learn to . . . close ranks. Always. You're right, I think, it wastes . . . energy, the spirit. You are open."

His words cost him so much, she thought, not like hers that just came dancing out of the air and went back into it; he spoke from his marrow. It made what he said a solemn compliment, which she accepted gratefully, for as the days went on she realized occasionally how much confidence she had lost and kept losing: self-confidence, confidence that they would be ransomed, rescued, that they would get out of this room, that they would get out of it alive.

"Was the war very brutal?"

"Yes," he said. "I can't . . . I've never been able to—to see it—Only something comes like a flash—" He held his hands up as if to shield his eyes. Then he glanced at her, wary. His apparently cast-iron self-respect was, she knew now, vulnerable in many places.

"Things from Kheakh that I didn't even know I saw, they come that way," she said. "At night." And after a while, "How long were you there?"

"Seven years."

She winced. "Were you lucky?"

It was a queer question, not coming out the way she meant, but he took it at value. "Yes," he said. "Always. The men I went there with were killed. Most of them in the first few years. We lost three hundred thousand men on Yeowe. They never talk about it. Two-thirds of the veot men in Voe Deo were killed. If it was lucky to live, I was lucky." He looked down at his clasped hands, locked into himself.

After a while she said softly, "I hope you still are."

He said nothing.

"How long has it been?" he asked, and she said, clearing her throat, after an automatic glance at her watch, "Sixty hours."

Their captors had not come yesterday at what had become a regular time, about eight in the morning. Nor had they come this morning.

With nothing left to eat and now no water left, they had grown increasingly silent and inert; it was hours since either had said anything. He had put off asking the time as long as he could prevent himself.

"This is horrible," she said, "this is so horrible. I keep thinking . . ."

"They won't abandon you," he said. "They feel a responsibility."

"Because I'm a woman?"

"Partly."

"Shit."

He remembered that in the other life her coarseness had offended him.

"They've been taken, shot. Nobody bothered to find out where they were keeping us," she said.

Having thought the same thing several hundred times, he had nothing to say.

"It's just such a horrible *place* to die," she said. "It's sordid. I stink. I've stunk for twenty days. Now I have diarrhea because I'm scared. But I can't shit anything. I'm thirsty and I can't drink."

"Solly," he said sharply. It was the first time he had spoken her name. "Be still. Hold fast."

She stared at him.

"Hold fast to what?"

He did not answer at once and she said, "You won't let me touch you!"

"Not to me—"

"Then to what? There isn't anything!" He thought she was going to cry, but she stood up, took the empty tray, and beat it against the door till it smashed into fragments of wicker and dust. "Come! God damn you! Come, you bastards!" she shouted. "Let us out of here!"

After that she sat down again on the mattress. "Well," she said.

"Listen," he said.

They had heard it before: no city sounds came down to this cellar, wherever it was, but this was something bigger, explosions, they both thought.

The door rattled.

They were both afoot when it opened: not with the usual clash and clang, but slowly. A man waited outside; two men came in. One, armed, they had never seen; the other, the tough-faced young man they called the spokesman, looked as if he had been running or fighting, dusty, worn out, a little dazed. He closed the door. He had some papers in his hand. The four of them stared at one other in silence for a minute.

"Water," Solly said. "You bastards!"

"Lady," the spokesman said, "I'm sorry." He was not listening to her. His eyes were not on her. He was looking at Teyeo, for the first time. "There is a lot of fighting," he said.

"Who's fighting?" Teyeo asked, hearing himself drop into the even tone of authority, and the young man respond to it as automatically: "Voe Deo. They sent troops. After the funeral, they said they would send troops unless we surrendered. They came yesterday. They go through the city killing. They know all the Old Believer centers. Some of ours." He had a bewildered, accusing note in his voice.

"What funeral?" Solly said.

When he did not answer, Teyeo repeated it: "What funeral?"

"The lady's funeral, yours. Here—I brought netprints—A state funeral. They said you died in the explosion."

"What God-damned explosion?" Solly said in her hoarse, parched voice, and this time he answered her: "At the Festival. The Old Believers. The fire, Tual's fire, there were explosives in it. Only it went off too soon. We knew their plan. We rescued you from that, lady," he said, suddenly turning to her with that same accusatory tone.

"Rescued me, you asshole!" she shouted, and Teyeo's dry lips split in a startled laugh, which he repressed at once.

"Give me those," he said, and the young man handed him the papers.

"Get us water!" Solly said.

"Stay here, please. We need to talk," Teyeo said, instinctively holding on to his ascendancy. He sat down on the mattress with the net prints. Within a few minutes he and Solly had scanned the reports of the shocking disruption of the Festival of Forgiveness, the lamentable death of the Envoy of the Ekumen in a terrorist act executed by the cult of Old Believers, the brief mention of the death of a Voe Dean Embassy guard in the explosion, which had killed over seventy priests and onlookers, the long descriptions of the state funeral, reports of unrest, terrorism, reprisals, then reports of the Palace gratefully accepting offers of assistance from Voe Deo in cleaning out the cancer of terrorism . . . .

"So," he said finally. "You never heard from the Palace. Why did you keep us alive?"

Solly looked as if she thought the question lacked tact, but the spokesman answered with equal bluntness, "We thought your country would ransom you."

"They will," Teyeo said. "Only you have to keep your government from knowing we're alive. If you—"

"Wait," Solly said, touching his hand. "Hold on. I want to think about this stuff. You'd better not leave the Ekumen out of the discussion. But getting in touch with them is the tricky bit."

"If there are Voe Dean troops here, all I need is to get a message to anyone in my command, or the Embassy Guards."

Her hand was still on his, with a warning pressure. She shook the other one at the spokesman, finger outstretched: "You kidnaped an Envoy of the Ekumen, you asshole! Now you have to do the thinking you didn't do ahead of time. And I do too, because I don't want to get blown away by your God-damned little government for turning up alive and embarrassing them. Where are you hiding, anyhow? Is there any chance of us getting out of this room, at least?"

The man, with that edgy, frantic look, shook his head. "We are all down here now," he said. "Most of the time. You stay here safe."

"Yes, you'd better keep your passports safe!" Solly said. "Bring us some water, damn it! Let us talk a while. Come back in an hour."

The young man leaned toward her suddenly, his face contorted. "What the hell kind of lady you are," he said. "You foreign filthy stinking cunt."

Teyeo was on his feet, but her grip on his hand had tightened: after a moment of silence, the spokesman and the other man turned to the door, rattled the lock, and were let out.

"Oaf," she said, looking dazed.

"Don't," he said, "don't—" He did not know how to say it. "They don't understand," he said. "It's better if I talk."

"Of course. Women don't give orders. Women don't talk. Shitheads! I thought you said they felt so responsible for me!"

"They do," he said. "But they're young men. Fanatics. Very frightened." And you talk to them as if they were assets, he thought, but did not say.

"Well so am I frightened!" she said, with a little spurt of tears. She wiped her eyes and sat down again among the papers. "God," she said. "We've been dead for twenty days. Buried for fifteen. Who do you think they buried?"

Her grip was powerful; his wrist and hand hurt. He massaged the place gently, watching her.

"Thank you," he said. "I would have hit him."

"Oh, I know. Goddamn chivalry. And the one with the gun would have blown your head off. Listen, Teyeo. Are you sure all you have to do is get word to somebody in the Army or the Guard?"

"Yes, of course."

"You're sure your country isn't playing the same game as Gatay?"

He stared at her. As he understood her, slowly the anger he had stifled and denied, all these interminable days of imprisonment with her, rose in him, a fiery flood of resentment, hatred, and contempt.

He was unable to speak, afraid he would speak to her as the young Patriot had done.

He went around to his side of the room and sat on his side of the mattress, somewhat turned from her. He sat cross-legged, one hand lying lightly in the other.

She said some other things. He did not listen or reply.

After a while she said, "We're supposed to be talking, Teyeo. We've only got an hour. I think those kids might do what we tell them, if we tell them something plausible—something that'll work."

He would not answer. He bit his lip and held still.

"Teyeo, what did I say? I said something wrong. I don't know what it was. I'm sorry."

"They would—" He struggled to control his lips and voice. "They would not betray us."

"Who? The Patriots?"

He did not answer.

"Voe Deo, you mean? Wouldn't betray us?"

In the pause that followed her gentle, incredulous question, he knew that she was right; that it was all collusion among the powers of the world; that his loyalty to his country and service was wasted, as futile as the rest of his life. She went on talking, palliating, saying he might very well be right. He put his head into his hands, longing for tears, dry as stone.

She crossed the line. He felt her hand on his shoulder.

"Teyeo, I am very sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to insult you! I honor you. You've been all my hope and help."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "If I—If we had some water."

She leapt up and battered on the door with her fists and a sandal. "Bastards, bastards," she shouted.

Teyeo got up and walked, three steps and turn, three steps and turn, and halted on his side of the room. "If you're right," he said, speaking slowly and formally, "we and our captors are in danger not only from Gatay but from my own people, who may . . . who have been furthering these anti-Government factions, in order to make an excuse to bring troops here . . . to *pacify* Gatay. That's why they know where to find the factionalists. We are . . . we're lucky our group was . . . was genuine."

She watched him with a tenderness that he found irrelevant.

"What we don't know," he said, "is what side the Ekumen will take. That is . . . There really is only one side."

"No, there's ours, too. The underdogs. If the Embassy sees Voe Deo pulling a takeover of Gatay, they won't interfere, but they won't approve. Especially if it involves as much repression as it seems to."

"The violence is only against the anti-Ekumen factions."

"They still won't approve. And if they find out I'm alive they're going to be quite pissed at the people who claimed I went up in a bonfire. Our problem is how to get word to them. I was the only person representing the Ekumen in Gatay. Who'd be a safe channel?"

"Any of my men. But . . ."

"They'll have been sent back; why keep Embassy Guards here when the Envoy's dead and buried? I suppose we could try. Ask the boys to try, that is." Presently she said wistfully, "I don't suppose they'd just let us go—in disguise? It would be the safest for them."

"There is an ocean," Teyeo said.

She beat her head. "Oh, why don't they bring some *water* . . . ." Her voice was like paper sliding on paper. He was ashamed of his anger, his grief, himself. He wanted to tell her that she had been a help and hope to him too, that he honored her, that she was brave beyond belief; but none of the words would come. He felt empty, worn out. He felt old. If only they would bring water!

Water was given them at last; some food, not much and not fresh. Clearly their captors were in hiding and under duress. The spokesman—he gave them his war-name, Kergat, Gatayan for Liberty—told them that whole neighborhoods had been cleared out, set afire, that Voe Dean troops were in control of most of the city including the palace, and that almost none of this was being reported in the net. "When this is over Voe Deo will own my country," he said with disbelieving fury.

"Not for long," Teyeo said.

"Who can defeat them?" the young man said.

"Yeowe. The idea of Yeowe."

Both Kergat and Solly stared at him.

"Revolution," he said. "How long before Werel becomes New Yeowe?"

"The assets?" Kergat said, as if Teyeo had suggested a revolt of cattle or of flies. "They'll never organize."

"Look out when they do," Teyeo said mildly.

"You don't have any assets in your group?" Solly asked Kergat, amazed. He did not bother to answer. He had classed her as an asset, Teyeo saw. He understood why; he had done so himself, in the other life, when such distinctions made sense.

"Your bondswoman, Rewe," he asked Solly—"was she a friend?"

"Yes," Solly said, then, "No. I wanted her to be."

"The makil?"

After a pause she said, "I think so."

"Is he still here?"

She shook her head. "The troupe was going on with their tour, a few days after the Festival."

"Travel has been restricted since the Festival," Kergat said. "Only government and troops."

"He's Voe Dean. If he's still here, they'll probably send him and his troupe home. Try and contact him, Kergat."

"A makil?" the young man said, with that same distaste and incredulity. "One of your Voe Dean homosexual clowns?"

Teyeo shot a glance at Solly: Patience, patience.

"Bisexual actors," Solly said, disregarding him; but fortunately Kergat was determined to disregard her.

"A clever man," Teyeo said, "with connections. He could help us. You and us. It could be worth it. If he's still here. We must make haste."

"Why would he help us? He is Voe Dean."

"An asset, not a citizen," Teyeo said. "And a member of Hame, the asset underground, which works against the government of Voe Deo. The Ekumen admits the legitimacy of Hame. He'll report to the Embassy that a Patriot group has rescued the Envoy and is holding her safe, in hiding, in extreme danger. The Ekumen, I think, will act promptly and decisively. Correct, Envoy?"

Suddenly reinstated, Solly gave a short, dignified nod. "But discreetly," she said. "They'll avoid violence, if they can use political coercion."

The young man was trying to get it all into his mind and work it through. Sympathetic to his weariness, distrust, and confusion, Teyeo sat quietly waiting. He noticed that Solly was sitting equally quietly, one hand lying in the other. She was thin and dirty and her unwashed, greasy hair was in a lank braid. She was brave, like a brave mare, all nerve; she would break her heart before she quit.

Kergat asked questions; Teyeo answered them, reasoning and reassuring. Occasionally Solly spoke, and Kergat was now listening to her again, uneasily, not wanting to, not after what he had called her. At last he left, not saying what he intended to do; but he had Batikam's name and an identifying message from Teyeo to the Embassy: "Half-pay veots learn to sing old songs quickly."

"What on earth!" Solly said when Kergat had gone.

"Did you know a man named Old Music, in the Embassy?"

"Ah! Is he a friend of yours?"

"He has been kind."

"He's been here on Werel from the start. A First Observer. Rather a powerful man. —Yes, and 'quickly,' all right . . . My mind really isn't working at all. I wish I could lie down beside a little stream, in a meadow, you know, and drink. All day. Every time I wanted to, just stretch my neck out and slup, slup, slup . . . . Running water . . . In the sunshine . . . Oh God, oh God, sunshine. Teyeo, this is very difficult. This is harder than ever. Thinking that there maybe is really a way out of here. Only not knowing. Trying not to hope and not to not hope. Oh, I am so tired of sitting here!"

"What time is it?"

"Half-past twenty. Night. Dark out. Oh God, darkness! Just to be in the darkness . . . . Is there any way we could cover up that damned biolume? Partly? To pretend we had night, so we could pretend we had day?"

"If you stood on my shoulders, you could reach it. But how could we fasten a cloth?"

They pondered, staring at the plaque.

"I don't know. Did you notice there's a little patch of it that looks like it's dying? Maybe we don't have to worry about making darkness. If we stay here long enough. Oh, God!"

"Well," he said after a while, curiously self-conscious, "I'm tired." He stood up, stretched, glanced for permission to enter her territory, got a drink of water, returned to his territory, took off his jacket and shoes, by which time her back was turned, took off his trousers, lay down, pulled up the blanket, and said in his mind, "Lord Kamye, let me hold fast to the one noble thing." But he did not sleep.

He heard her slight movements; she pissed, poured a little water, took off her sandals, lay down.

A long time passed.

"Teyeo."

"Yes."

"Do you think . . . that it would be a mistake . . . under the circumstances . . . to make love?"

A pause.

"Not under the circumstances," he said, almost inaudibly. "But—in the other life—"

A pause.

"Short life versus long life," she murmured.

"Yes."

A pause.

"No," he said, and turned to her. "No, that's wrong." They reached out to each other. They clasped each other, cleaved together, in blind haste, greed, need, crying out together the name of God in their different languages and then like animals in the wordless voice. They huddled together, spent, sticky, sweaty, exhausted, reviving, rejoined, reborn in the body's tenderness, in the endless exploration, the ancient discovery, the long flight to the new world.

He woke slowly, in ease and luxury. They were entangled, his face was against her arm and breast; she was stroking his hair, sometimes his neck and shoulder. He lay for a long time aware only of that lazy rhythm and the cool of her skin against his face, under his hand, against his leg.

"Now I know," she said, her half-whisper deep in her chest, near his ear, "that I don't know you. Now I need to know you." She bent forward to touch his face with her lips and cheek.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Tell me who Teyeo is . . . ."

"I don't know," he said. "A man who holds you dear."

"Oh, God," she said, hiding her face for a moment in the rough, smelly blanket.

"Who is God?" he asked sleepily. They spoke VoeDean, but she usually swore in Terran or Alterran; in this case it had been Alterran, *seyt,* so he asked, "Who is Seyt?"

"Oh—Tual—Kamye—what have you. I just say it. It's just bad language. Do you believe in one of them? I'm sorry! I feel like such an oaf with you, Teyeo. Blundering into your soul, invading you— We *are* invaders, no matter how pacificist and priggish we are—"

"Must I love the whole Ekumen?" he asked, beginning to stroke her breasts, feeling her tremor of desire and his own.

"Yes," she said, "yes, yes."

It was curious, Teyeo thought, how little sex changed anything. Everything was the same, a little easier, less embarrassment and inhibition; and there was a certain and lovely source of pleasure for them, when they had enough water and food to have enough vitality to make love. But the only thing that was truly different was something he had no word for. Sex, comfort, tenderness, love, trust, no word was the right word, the whole word. It was utterly intimate, hidden in the mutuality of their bodies, and it changed nothing in their circumstances, nothing in the world, even the tiny wretched world of their imprisonment. They were still trapped. They were getting very tired and were hungry most of the time. They were increasingly afraid of their increasingly desperate captors.

"I will be a lady," Solly said. "A good girl. Tell me how, Teyeo."

"I don't want you to give in," he said, so fiercely, with tears in his eyes, that she went to him and held him in her arms.

"Hold fast," he said.

"I will," she said. But when Kergat or the others came in she was sedate and modest, letting the men talk, keeping her eyes down. He could not bear to see her so, and knew she was right to do so.

The doorlock rattled, the door clashed, bringing him up out of a wretched, thirsty sleep. It was night or very early morning. He and Solly had been sleeping close entangled for the warmth and comfort of it; and seeing Kergat's face now he was deeply afraid. This was what he had feared, to show, to prove her sexual vulnerability. She was still only half-awake, clinging to him.

Another man had come in. Kergat said nothing. It took Teyeo some time to recognize the second man as Batikam.

When he did, his mind remained quite blank. He managed to say the makil's name. Nothing else.

"Batikam?" Solly croaked. "Oh, my God!"

"This is an interesting moment," Batikam said in his warm actor's voice. He was not transvestite, Teyeo saw, but wore Gatayan men's clothing. "I meant to rescue you, not to embarrass you, Envoy, Rega. Shall we get on with it?"

Teyeo had scrambled up and was pulling on his filthy trousers. Solly had slept in the ragged pants their captors had given her. They both had kept on their shirts for warmth.

"Did you contact the Embassy, Batikam?" she was asking, her voice shaking, as she pulled on her sandals.

"Oh, yes. I've been there and come back, indeed. Sorry it took so long. I don't think I quite realized your situation here."

"Kergat has done his best for us," Teyeo said at once, stiffly.

"I can see that. At considerable risk. I think the risk from now on is low. That is . . ." He looked straight at Teyeo. "Rega, how do you feel about putting yourself in the hands of Hame?" he said. "Any problems with that?"

"Don't, Batikam," Solly said. "Trust him!"

Teyeo tied his shoe, straightened up, and said, "We are all in the hands of the Lord Kamye."

Batikam laughed, the beautiful full laugh they remembered.

"In the Lord's hands, then," he said, and led them out of the room.

In the *Arkamye* it is said, "To live simply is most complicated."

Solly requested to stay on Werel, and after a recuperative leave at the seashore was sent as Observer to South Voe Deo. Teyeo went straight home, being informed that his father was very ill. After his father's death, he asked for indefinite leave from the Embassy Guard, and stayed on the farm with his mother until her death two years later. He and Solly, a continent apart, met only occasionally during those years.

When his mother died, Teyeo freed his family's assets by act of irrevocable manumission, deeded over their farms to them, sold his now almost valueless property at auction, and went to the capital. He knew Solly was temporarily staying at the Embassy. Old Music told him where to find her. He found her in a small office of the palatial building. She looked older, very elegant. She looked at him with a stricken and yet wary face. She did not come forward to greet him or touch him. She said, "Teyeo, I've been asked to be First Mobile on Yeowe."

He stood still.

"Just now—I just came from talking on the ansible with Hain—" She put her face in her hands. "Oh, my God!" she said.

He said, "My congratulations, truly, Solly."

She suddenly ran at him, threw her arms around him, and cried, "Oh, Teyeo, and your mother died, I never thought, I'm so sorry, I never, I never do—I thought we could—What are you going to do? Are you going to stay there?"

"I sold it," he said. He was enduring rather than returning her embrace. "I thought I might return to the service."

"You sold your *farm?* But I never saw it!"

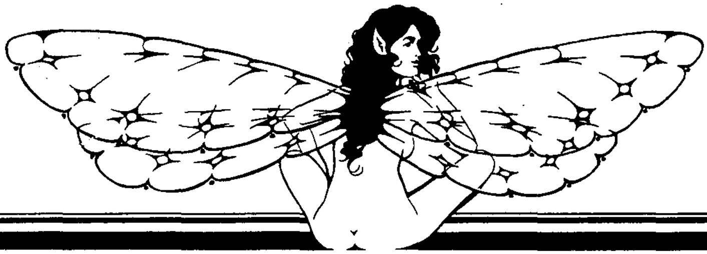
"I never saw where you were born," he said.

There was a pause. She stood away from him, and they looked at each other.

"You would come?" she said.

"I would," he said.

Several years after Yeowe entered the Ekumen, Mobile Solly Agat Terwa was sent as an Ekumenical liaison to Terra; later she went from there to Hain, where she served with great distinction as a Stabile. In all her travels and posts she was accompanied by a Werelian army officer some years older than herself, a very handsome man, as reserved as she was outgoing. People who knew them knew their passionate pride and trust in each other. Solly was perhaps the happier person, rewarded and fulfilled in her work; but Teyeo had no regrets. He had lost his world, but he had held fast to the one noble thing. ●



NEXT ISSUE

Well, it's Christmastime again, that Jolly Time of the Year when the national suicide rate *skyrockets*, and so, in keeping with long tradition, and in a determined effort to entertain and distract you enough to keep you away from the gun or the poison bottle, we bring you a Christmas story next month, in our December issue—in fact, in a gallant attempt to stack the odds for survival in your favor, we bring you three of them! First, multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis,** whose memorable Christmas stories have graced several of our December issues, attempts to scare the Dickens *into* you with a sprightly and spirited account of a very unusual kind of haunting, in "Adaptation." Then **Robert Frazier** and **James Patrick Kelly** join forces to show us how some things don't change even under the impact of accelerating Future Shock, as they take us to a divided and embattled high-tech

(continued on page 318)

ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

CRASHCOURSE
Wilhelmina Baird
Ace, $4.99, 277 pp.
PASSION PLAY
Sean Stewart
Ace, $4.50, 194 pp.
GUN, WITH OCCASIONAL MUSIC
Jonathan Lethem
Harcourt, Brace & Co. $19.95
218 pp.
RING OF SWORDS
Eleanor Arnason
Tor/Orb, $12.95, 383 pp.,
January 1995
SCISSORS CUT PAPER WRAP STONE
Ian McDonald
Bantam Spectra, $3.99, 160 pp.
A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION
Phillip Kerr
Farrar Straus & Giroux, $20;
Penguin $9.95.

Sometimes I start with a subject already in mind for one of these essays and choose relevant books to read accordingly. Sometimes what I've been reading at random begins to suggest a topic about which the next one is going to cohere, and I choose further reading that seems as if it will be relevant. Sometimes the deadline approaches with no theme burning in my mind, and I look back over everything I've read since the last one to see what pattern will emerge.

This was one of those times.

And the pattern that emerged was quite unexpected.

The stream of books coming in had hit a rather dead patch. There was very little that I could begin to read with keen anticipation, and, frankly, the creative state of the genre being what it has become of late, it has for some time seemed to me a more critically useful mission to seek out worthy but obscure work to call to readers' attention than to pan the obvious turkeys. And from a selfish point of view, I'd much rather spend my reading time on fiction that I can at least hope to enjoy than dourly grinding my way through important crap so as to work up my ire for a hatchet-job.

So I had decided I'd probably do one of the pieces on new voices or first novels that I do from time to time, and skewed my reading in that direction, though not obsessively.

But when I perused the books I had read in the last couple of months, an amazing connection socked me between the eyeballs.

Three first novels: *Crashcourse* by Wilhelmina Baird, *Passion Play*, by Sean Stewart, and *Gun, with Occasional Music,* by Jonathan Letham.

A second novel by Eleanor Arnason, *Ring of Swords.*

A short novel by Ian McDonald, *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone.*

A first science fiction novel, *A Philosophical Investigation,* by Philip Kerr, who had written three previous novels outside the genre.

A streetwise cyberpunk opus, a dark meditation on Christian fundamentalism and the art of acting, a semi-humorous private eye novel of the future, a piece of anthropological science fiction, a magical mystery tour, and an intellectual thriller set in the next century.

What, you ask, could they all possibly have in common?

First person viewpoint narration!

All but the Arnason and the Kerr are narrated entirely in first person, and *they* are montages of first person and third.

Why such a pattern is so retrospectively astonishing takes a bit of explanation . . .

While a few perverse works written primarily just to show it can be done have been written in second person, almost all fiction is generally written in either first person—from the point of view of an "I"—or third person—from the point of view of a "he" or "she" or, at least in SF, the occasional "it."

I flew the rocketship to Mars. *First Person.*

He flew the rocketship to Mars. *Third Person.*

A simple grammatical distinction, right? What's the big deal?

First person:

I flew the rocketship to Mars, bored out of my mind, and puking my guts out all the way, wishing I hadn't let the President talk me into being such a heroic asshole.

Third person:

Spinrad was two-and-a-half sheets to the wind already when the President slipped a peyote button into his martini and started sweet-talking him about his patriotic duty, and the next thing he knew clearly, he was flying the rocketship to Mars, bored out of his mind, puking his guts out, and wondering how the son of a bitch had talked him into being such a heroic asshole.

Third person with stream of consciousness:

Spinrad was two-and-a-half sheets to the wind already when the President slipped a peyote button into his martini and started sweet-talking him about his patriotic duty, and the next thing he knew clearly, he was flying the rocketship to Mars, bored out of his mind, and puking his guts out.

"How did I let the son of a bitch talk me into being such a heroic asshole?" he wondered.

From the above example, you can see that out of the deceptively simple grammatical decision to use either first person or third person narrative viewpoint, determinative literary consequences exfoliate.

In first person viewpoint, the character tells the whole story entirely in his own words and in his own voice, and the writer can only reveal what the character knows and wishes to reveal and is restricted to the *character's* style and vocabulary.

In old-fashioned straight third person narration, it is the voice of an outside narrator, the writer, telling the story, and he is therefore free to adopt any style and tell the reader almost anything, but he cannot convey the character's verbal style of mind directly.

The more modern post-Joycean third-person viewpoint narration with stream of consciousness, however, allows writers to have their cake and eat it too by permitting third-person narrative omniscience and utilization of the writer's full literary palette while also permitting the direct portrayal of the character's own thoughts as if they were dialogue. Or for that matter, the thought-streams of several third person viewpoint characters in the same tale.

For this reason, it has long been the general writing course and workshop wisdom that fiction should be written in this modern form of third person narration unless there is a damn good reason to tell the story in first person.

After all, it would seem to be a much more flexible and powerful instrument, a literary technique so obviously puissant that the strange thing perhaps is that it wasn't developed long before the turn of the twentieth century.

Yet it was none other than Rudyard Kipling, hardly considered a flaming literary Bolshevik, who declared:

"There are nine and sixty ways of composing tribal lays
And every single one of them is right."

When they work, that is.

And here we have six novels where first person viewpoint narration *does* work for one reason or another, to one degree or another, not a one of them a failure, not a one of them where the choice of first person narration was wrong.

True, when compared to modern third person narrative technique, first person narration is restrictive, but sometimes self-imposed artistic restriction is not a bad thing.

Wilhelmina Baird, it can be more or less reliably supposed, is probably not a professional cat-burglar living in a grotty rundown future metropolis which makes contemporary Detroit or New York seem like an urban planner's vision of utopia.

Cass, the narrator and protagonist of *Crashcourse,* on the other hand, is. She is a creature of Baird's fictional future world, and she speaks and thinks like one. While intelligent, indeed perhaps sometimes a tad too intelligent for credibility, and informed when it comes to the details of her own extended environment, she has little if any historic sense. She is so much an inhabitant of her down-but-not-out demi-monde, the Strip, that even though this neighborhood and parts of the greater world around it are described in great and often telling detail, we never even know what city this is. And what's more, we don't really care. The environment is as real for us as it is for Cass. We know no more about it than she does and no less.

The world of *Crashcourse* is one in which the pauperization of the working class and the proletarianization of the middle class that we are presently witnessing has proceeded apace, and society is sharply divided into four classes: the upper class Aris who own most of everything, the Techs and the Arts, who work for them and have the right to earn and hold money, and the Umps, the great army of the unemployed to which Cass belongs who have virtually no rights at all.

Cass lives in a ménage à trois with two other Umps who wish to become Arts: Moke, a sculptor, and Dosh, a male hooker and would-be actor. The plot of the story concerns what happens when the three of them sign a contract that will either be their ticket out of the Strip and off planet or a death-warrant, and most likely the latter.

It's a contract for major parts in a movie, but in this fictional universe, the Ari audience shares the emotions of the actors, the actors aren't told when the movie begins, the body count is far higher than even a Rambo movie or a Toho samurai epic, and the deaths are for real . . .

At 277 pages, the novel is well-paced for the amount of story, even a little slowed by the occasional somewhat clumsy expository lump here and there, and certainly does not suffer from excessive brevity, inattention to character, or lack of admirably detailed world-building within the limits of that compass.

Now imagine what Baird's task would have been like if she had tried to write the same novel with the same protagonist but in third person.

If she narrated the novel in her own voice as present-day author rather in that of the future historically uneducated Cass, Baird would be under considerable pressure to explain how Cass' society evolved from us. She would certainly have to specify the city in which the action takes place. The science and technology behind the existence of the mutated intelligent and semi-intelligent animals and of cyborgs like Swordfish would have to be touched upon.

It would be hard to escape laying in the back-story of how Cass, Moke and Dosh came to be a ménage à trois in the first place. Her strange upbringing by Swordfish would have to be more than alluded to the way it is in the book as written.

But by telling the story in Cass' first person voice, Baird escapes most of these necessities, which would have turned the same story into a slower-paced and longer book.

Cass cannot be expected to know more of the historical roots of her society than a contemporary burglar would of the roots of *ours* in the nineteenth century. Telling her story to a contemporary, which is a literary conceit in this sort of thing, she would no more naturally pause to explain the technology than you or I would feel constrained to explain the internal combustion engine or the telephone when doing the same thing. So too do we seldom hector a new acquaintance with the story of our childhood or how we came to meet our mates several years ago when we have a more immediate tale to tell.

Evading the necessity of explaining too much to the point of prolixity is one of the inherent *negative* virtues of first person viewpoint narration, and when Baird occasionally drops out of the logic of the character to deliver a bit too much of an expository lump, we see why.

This is a good first novel, but not a perfect one, and, aside from a certain amount of convenient coincidence in the plotting, and the overuse of the puissant Swordfish and his street mercenaries as deus ex machina fairy godfathers, its imperfections lie in the less than perfect subsumation of Baird, the author, into the voice of Cass, her character. Here and there, the voice slips a tad. Here and there, Cass delivers the kind of "as you know" asides that would be handled easily enough by a bit of straightforward exposition in third person.

One of the main *positive* virtues of first person narration, especially in science fiction, is that, when done right as Baird does here, it enables the author to use the prose of the novel itself to both convey the consciousness of the character and characterize the imaginary society with an immediacy that even third person viewpoint with stream of consciousness cannot quite deliver.

Baird does this very nicely indeed, having Cass narrate the story in a somewhat compressed but more or less standard English larded with the slang, idioms, and somewhat mutated locations of her time. This accomplishes several ends.

It erases the psychic distance between character and reader by forcing the reader to relate to the character's consciousness-style without expository dilution on the part of the author. It warps the readers into the imaginary culture by forcing them to relate to it in terms of that culture's linguistic patterns rather than their own. And the nature of the word changes—contractions, idioms, and so forth—paint a subtle subconscious portrait of the nature of the imagined culture itself.

In *Gun, with Occasional Music,* another good first novel, albeit of a somewhat different sort, Jonathan Letham uses first person narration more conventionally, in more than one sense of the word.

What we have here is a cross-genre hybrid, a semi-hardboiled private eye mystery novel set in a rather dystopian fairly near-future San Francisco Bay Area.

Conrad Metcalf, the somewhat down-at-the-heels private eye in question, is, of course, enmeshed in a murder investigation in which he finds he has more at stake than his fee, must cope with assorted hoods, unfriendly cops, less unfriendly cops, women who cannot be trusted, Mr. Bigs, and so forth.

Were this set in *contemporary* San Francisco and environs, it would be a conventional sort of private eye novel of a certain subgenre, wherein the wisecracking smart-ass first person gumshoe narrator takes the reader on a tour of the low dives and high life of his burg of operation, chasing one dame while being chased by another, one step ahead of the bill collectors and his bank manager and one deductive step behind the perpetrators until the climax, in perpetual danger of having his license lifted by the cops, receiving a thump on the head from time to time and delivering same, and commenting ruefully and wryly upon the goings-on all the while.

In other words, Letham has adopted a quite familiar mystery convention to tell a tale that would be a conventional private eye story were it not set in the future; a convention that commonly uses first person narration in order to restrict the reader's knowledge entirely to what the detective knows when he knows it for the purposes of the conventional mystery plotting, and in which the smart-ass world-weary first person narration of the cynical hard-boiled dick is half the appeal, especially if the author has visions of creating a character who will generate a series of novels.

The style which Letham adopts, which is to say the voice of his narrator, Metcalf, is well within the range of the hard-boiled dick convention; that is, he sounds more like any number of such characters from any number of contemporary detective novels than he does like a denizen of the future.

However, he *is* a denizen of the future, and the future he inhabits is both familiar and strange.

Although this and that about the cityscape has changed, Metcalf's San Francisco has the well-realized, lived-in, somewhat seedy, hoozy ambiance of Sam Spade's; a San Francisco of the pop culture mind that even readers who have never been there will feel that they recognize.

But although this *Maltese Falcon* atmosphere combines with the conventional private eye voice to produce a sensation of floaty cinematic familiarity, Lethem's is actually quite a strange future, sinister and gonzo at the same time. The government controls the news to the point where all the radio plays is wordless musical interpretation thereof. One of the main heavies is an intelligent, or at least sapient, talking kangaroo. Metcalf, like everyone else, is addicted to his own private blend of mood-controlling drugs, a situation which is not only tolerated, but subsidized and ultimately mandated by the government. Another down-at-the-heels private eye is a chimpanzee. And so forth.

What makes the novel work well is three sets of tensions: the tension between the comic and horrific aspects of the imagined culture; the tension between the cozy familiarity of the novel's future San Francisco and the weirdness of what is going on in it; the tension between the outré science fictional thematic material and the voice of the private eye narrating the story, which belongs to quite another literary genre.

Had Lethem attempted to tell *Gun, With Occasional Music* in third person, these tensions would have been impossible to maintain. The tone of the author's third person narration would have had to at least comment on the relationship between the comic and sinister aspects of his world. So too, the tension between its familiarity and its weirdness could only be maintained, paradoxically enough, by the first person narration of a citizen thereof to whom both aspects can exist on exactly the same reality level. And of course, without the private eye doing the narrating, this would be merely a kind of SF about a detective.

But by choosing first person and preserving these sets of creative tensions, Jonathan Lethem has written a novel that can be both grim and funny, familiar and strange, a hybrid of science fiction and detective genres that succeeds by transcending both sets of conventions.

Sometimes, though rather rarely, the tensions and contradictions exist *within* a first person narrator, nor is every first person narrator necessarily always to be trusted.

Diane Fletcher is the first person narrator of *Passion Play,* yet another first novel, this one by Sean Stewart, and perhaps the best, and certainly the most literarily ambitious, of the three such books herein under consideration.

That an apparently male writer should adopt a female first-person viewpoint, in a first novel at that, and pull it off successfully, is impressive enough. That he should utilize a narrator who is not entirely to be trusted is even more unusual, but in a way both choices are perfectly appropriate to the thematic core of the novel, which is about the relationship between the psychic interior and the phenomenological surface of character, between empathy and acting.

Formally, this is another detective novel set in the future.

Diane Fletcher is a "hunter"; not quite a private eye, not quite not a private eye either, she is a freelancer who works for the police on a case-by-case contract basis. She is also, not-so-coincidentally, a "shaper."

This is something like an empath, but not quite, something like a talent, something like a curse. The shaper cannot help but sense what people around her feel but psychic survival requires that she develop an emotional shell, a kind of deadening of the spirit, to avoid to the extent possible the emotional *import* of other people's sensations. The shaper also senses patterns of psychic interplay—not only senses them, but is sucked up into them, has great difficulty not surrendering to their imperatives.

That's why Diane is a hunter. The talent aspect makes her the ideal tracker of perpetrators; the emotional deadening she must maintain to stay more or less sane means she is most alive when on the prowl, subsumed by the chase.

Both of these aspects, as one might imagine, cause shapers to be hated and feared, and they are constrained to conceal their true natures.

Diane is commissioned to solve the murder of Jonathan Mask, a great actor and theorist of acting, who has been murdered by someone involved with the production of *Faustus* in which Mask was playing Mephistopheles, and the bulk of the novel is the story of her investigation of the cast and company.

The society in which the story takes place is far stranger than Lethem's future San Francisco, but technology has little or nothing to do with it except for a few minor gizmos. Far from it. For this is a future United States with a "Redemptionist"—that is, fundamentalist Christian—administration, which regards technology, among many other things, as an instrumentality of Satan; a necessary evil, perhaps, but one to be minimized, and rolled back to the extent possible.

Jonathan Mask had been the most famous and successful actor in America, the white knight of Redemptionist theater. Underneath the mask of Mask, however, Diane soon discovers, was indeed a Mephistophelian demon.

So what we have here is a theatrical murder mystery, in which the victim is a Faustian actor hiding behind the mask of fundamentalist Christian appearances, and the suspects are actors and the director and theatrical technicians, narrated in first person by a detective who herself is keeping her inner nature hidden—from the world, and to a certain extent from herself.

The title, *Passion Play*, as well as the tone, not to mention the centrality of things Faustian, let us know that this is probably going to be a tragedy as well as a mystery, though whose, and how, is more than should be revealed here.

Victim, suspects, the detective herself, all are one way or another hiding behind masks, concealing inner aspects of themselves or projecting personae; acting—in other words, playing roles.

One of the philosophical divides of the acting profession is between technical actors who play their parts from the outside, creating a convincing phenomenological surface, and Method actors who play their roles from the inside, attempting to encompass the emotional reality of the character they are playing. In a more general psychological sense this is one of the central issues in *Passion Play*, the question of emotional distance from the parts we assume in the play of our lives.

It would have been impossible for Stewart to write such a novel in third person viewpoint even if the only thoughts rendered in stream of consciousness were Diane's, since the essence of the story lies in psychic ambiguity, emotional defensive mechanisms, self-deceptions, masks behind masks, and so forth, all of which would evaporate if a voice outside the play were to comment upon the actions and psychic states of the players.

And what would also be lost is the genius of this novel, that which distinguishes it from so many other science fictional fundamentalist Christian dystopias in which the repressive society is overthrown or the piss is taken out of it humorously or in earnest by the author.

Most of us would no doubt find Stewart's Redemptionist America thoroughly unpleasant. Many of the superficially Redemptionist characters in the book—first and foremost, Jonathan Mask—have feet of clay. They are only playing the parts of believers because they must. Diane Fletcher herself would seem to detest this theocratically repressive society. And yet . . .

And yet the Redemptionist society is taken as a given, not only by Stewart, the self-effacing author, but by Diane, his narrator. Yes, most readers will find it repulsive, yes, there is a great deal of hypocrisy on all of its levels, yes, the narrator is no true believer, but . . .

No, the evil empire is not destroyed. No, those who do believe are not without certain virtues. And most interesting of all, even those characters who are anti-Redemptionist at heart, first and foremost the narrator, cannot help but speak in Redemptionist jargon, use Biblical metaphor and imagery, think in fundamentalist Christian terms.

For ultimately, like it or not, love it or hate it, this is the social matrix in which Diane's individual psyche was formed, this is the linguistic matrix of her consciousness, and if her pro forma profession of belief is an act she must put on for society, on another level, her inner profession of disbelief is a kind of role too.

Thus, Diane Fletcher engages in an inner dialogue with herself, sometimes overt, sometimes occluded, even as she tells her story to the reader, a dialogue that could not be rendered in any other form than first person singular.

Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone, a short novel by Ian McDonald, and by no means a first novel, is, in a way, the flip side of *Passion Play.* It is the first person story of Ethan Ring, not someone enmeshed in the coils of a theocratic society, but a voluntary pilgrim on a vision quest seeking both absolution from guilt and the redemptive regaining not so much of lost faith in the western sense as of a mystical Taoistic center.

Ethan Ring had been involved with artistic circles that chanced to develop "Fracters," a palette of visual patterns so psychically and spiritually puissant that to gaze upon them is to be irresistibly subsumed into the condition each one generates—nirvanic awe, amnesia, even death.

The artistic and even mystic possibilities are manifoldly obvious, but it doesn't take too much thinking to realize that the military and intelligence agencies of governments might conceivably have some use for such Fracters too. And through various plot complications, Ethan Ring has been constrained thereby to serve as intelligence agent and assassin, his mightiest weapon a tattoo on the palm of his hand.

Ring himself narrates the present tense of the novel—that is, the story of his literal religious pilgrimage around a wonderfully extrapolated and realized future Japan—in first person present tense, and the intercut back story in third person past tense, as if he were telling the story of some other person.

Indeed, Ring the first person present-tense pilgrim keeps trying to convince the reader and himself that the third-person past Ethan Ring who was constrained to commit all those crimes in the service of his government *was* another person, that in some karmic sense that Ring is dead and he is another soul in the process of spiritual rebirth.

Thus what we have here is a third-person narration of the past within a first person narration of the present, with the third person voice being not that of Ian McDonald as the author, but that of his first person present protagonist, Ethan Ring.

Complex? You bet. Ian McDonald has by now emerged as one of the best writers at this length around, and he has done it with just such subtleties of voice and complexities of form in the service of a compelling story set in truly original extrapolated venues.

Could he have told this story in some simpler and less convoluted manner? Not likely. *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone* is the story of a present tense pilgrim struggling with his past tense incarnation, one man, two sequential souls, or so at least Ring keeps trying to convince himself until the apotheosis.

If McDonald had written the novel in his own voice in third person while conveying both time streams, the consciousness of both Ethan Rings, not only would it have been *more* formally convoluted, but the essence of it—the pilgrim's struggle with his previous spiritual incarnation—would have been lost entirely.

Interestingly enough, the final two novels under consideration, *Ring of Swords,* by Eleanor Arnason, and *A Philosophical Investigation,* by Philip Kerr, though they have just about nothing else in common, both mix third person narration with the same peculiar form of first person, to wit, the journal or diary.

Ring of Swords is an excellent piece of fairly straightforward anthropological science fiction, a contact story in which humanity and the Hwarhath, a humanoid and openly warlike race and proud of it, confront each other militarily, politically, and culturally. The militarily puissant Hwarhath are searching for a proper enemy and hope we are it, but for some reason these weird humans fail to fit their cultural scheme.

Anna Perez is a scientist studying a possibly sapient alien species on a planet on the interface between human and Hwarhath space where humans and Hwarhath are engaging in diplomatic negotiations which are going nowhere since the two species do not even understand each other's goals, and Arnason narrates the bulk of the novel from her third person viewpoint.

Human Military Intelligence (herein a contradiction in terms) takes matters in its own hands, a catastrophic battle ensues, Anna is captured by the Hwarhath, and eventually conditionally released to serve as a kind of go-between in yet another set of negotiations between humans and Hwarhath in a Hwarhath artificial habitat.

So she is an ideal viewpoint character for exploring the human side of this cultural conflict—intelligent, perceptive, a specialist of sorts in interspecies contact, in the right place at the right time—and the third person viewpoint with stream of consciousness allows Arnason to legitimately use the artful and judicious author exposition that would seem to be de rigueur in this sort of thing.

But what about the other side of this anthropological equation? How to convincingly portray the alien Hwarhath? In a novel of clashing cultures like this, one cannot simply stick entirely with the humans and make one's thematic points.

Believable aliens are always a

problem. After all, the whole point of aliens, and particularly in a novel like this, is that they're *alien.* If you try to get inside their consciousness in either first person or third, you've got to either opt for as much realism as you can muster and write something close to gibberish, or adopt the usual unrealistic convention and give the reader humans in alien suits speaking and thinking in some kind of weirdly ungrammatical English sprinkled with unpronounceable alien words.

Or . . .

Or you can do what Eleanor Arnason has done here.

Nicholas Sanders, a human who was captured by the Hwarhath years before the time frame of *Ring of Swords,* has been long isolated from human contact, and has not only shifted allegiance to the Hwarhath but has become the lover of the Hwarhath general overseeing the negotiations, Ettin Gwarha.

We see him from Anna's third person viewpoint, but we are also privy to select portions of the diary or journal he writes in first person, largely in the form of reports and letters to his lover and commanding officer, Gwarha.

This accomplishes several things. It allows Sanders to tell his own back story, of which Anna, and hence the reader, would otherwise be ignorant. It allows Sanders to reveal himself and his own motivations to the reader in a selective and possibly self-serving manner, which aids in his characterization.

But first and foremost, it finesses the whole problem of portraying the Hwarhath as individuals and as a culture.

On the most trivial level, since this *is* a human's journal, we readily accept its translation of Hwarhath dialogue into standard English, for the *form itself* is an artificial literary construct.

Far more importantly, though, it gives us a *human* point of entrée into the alien culture. Cut off from all contact with other humans, Sanders has had to acculturate to the Hwarhath or face a life of total social isolation. Having lived among the aliens, he understands them, can emphathize with them, literally as much as any human can, including the reader, but *no more.*

His viewpoint is as close as we, the readers, can get to seeing these aliens from the inside, being humans ourselves. Arnason *could* have told the sections from Sanders' point of view in third person stream of consciousness as she does with Anna Perez, but then we would be getting the alien culture twice removed. She could have used simple first person viewpoint for these sections, rather than the journal, but then we would lose Sanders' retrospective musings on the story of his life among the Hwarhath, his informed reinterpretation of events that were entirely mystifying to his earlier self.

As it is, Arnason has chosen the perfect mix of viewpoints for this particular story, and as a bonus we get Anna's third person perception of Sanders contrasted with Sanders' explication of himself to his alien commander and lover, sometimes concerning the same conditions or events.

This montage of first person and third person viewpoints is a complex and seldom-used novelistic strategy, but in *A Philosophical Investigation,* Philip Kerr uses it again, and the first person segments are *also* in journal form. Here, however, the usage is quite different.

This is Kerr's first science fiction novel, but he is the author of three previous detective novels, and formally it would be more accurate to call *A Philosophical Investigation* a mystery set in the future.

On the other hand, it is an example of how essentially stupid such genre classifications are in literary terms, for thematically and in terms of extrapolation the book also succeeds admirably as science fiction.

In this near-future England, anti-crime hysteria has proceeded to the point where convicted criminals are punished by "punitive coma." Lesser criminals are put into a coma and stuck in a life-support drawer for a fixed term and then revived, killers are put into irreversible coma. This serves two ends. It satisfies the anti-capital punishment wimps since technically no one is executed, and it saves lots and lots of money, since storing a convict in a drawer for a year costs a small fraction of the tariff for incarceration, feeding, and guarding same in a conscious state in some expensive prison.

And then we have the Lombroso project. It has been discovered that your typical serial killer lacks a Ventro Medial Nucleus in his brain, the bit that inhibits the male aggressive response. The male population of Britain has been tested (chez Kerr, almost all serial killers are male, and from what I've read elsewhere this seems to be accurate), and those who prove lacking in a VMN have their names entered in a data base via coding system and are offered therapy aimed at aiding them in overcoming this somatic tendency to multiple murder.

Detective Chief Inspector Isadora "Jake" Jakowicz is Kerr's third person viewpoint protagonist. Jake, a thoroughly modern copper with a masters degree and a certain anti-masculine attitude based in large part upon her bad relationship with her thoroughly unpleasant father, specializes in serial killers, most of whom, chez Kerr, specialize in killing women.

Her antagonist, the first person diarist, nameless up until the very end, is one of these VMN negative potential serial killers who has managed to get ahold of the VNM negative list, and has become . . . *a serial killer of serial killers!*

His code name on the list is "Wittgenstein" and he is going down the list of VNM negatives with philosophers' code names, putting six slugs into the backs of their heads, and choosing his victims in part through his opinion of the philosophical works of their arbitrarily-chosen namesakes.

This we get via the journal he is writing and we are reading as the events in the story progress; the diary of a highly intelligent, well-educated, coldly logical, crazed serial killer with a prolix bent for endless philosophical self-justification.

Crazed?

Is he?

By his lights, he is doing a service to society by eliminating these potential menaces, and turning his own genetic misfortune, his own potential for evil, his own inborn tendency to serial murder, to the service of social good.

It's hard to refute this logic, isn't it? Every time he takes one life, he prevents several potential murders, and indeed many of the people he kills have *already* begun their careers as serial killers.

Worse still for Jake, especially after the killer enters into dialogue with her via untraceable satellite telephone—professionally speaking, aren't they on the same side? She tracks serial killers, and when she catches them, they're put into irreversible coma, arguably a literal fate worse than death. He eliminates them cleanly and surgically with six shots to the back of the head.

And psychologically speaking, the logic is even more twisted for her. Her personal history has given her a jaundiced viewpoint on the male of the species, she specializes in catching serial killers who prey horribly on women, and Wittgenstein is not only eliminating these murderous misogynists, he is righteously deflecting his own inborn tendency to kill women into a crusade to save women from people like himself.

Thus, the multiple meanings of the title, *A Philosophical Investigation*. On the straight mystery plot level, Kerr has set things up so that many of the actual clues involved the philosophical theories of the code names. On a science fictional level, the science in question being criminology in the extended sense, we have a philosophical investigation of the nature and morality of the relationship between crime, punishment, redemption, and retribution. And on a personal characterological level, we have a detective tracking a killer, who, in all save his relationship to the law, would seem to be her ally.

And of course, were we not privy to the diary of Wittgenstein, if Kerr told the whole thing in third person from Jake's point of view, all we would have would be a futuristic whodunit, with the detective and her colleagues tracking down the killer via the phenomenological clues. On the other hand, if Kerr had given us Wittgenstein's third person viewpoint, or clear first person narration, he would have had to have gone to incredibly artificial and ultimately futile contortions of concealment to maintain the mystery of the killer's identity at all.

Thus is the conventional caution against the use of first person viewpoint turned on its head by this novel and by the others we have considered herein.

The conventional writers' workshop and creative writing class wisdom is that first person viewpoint is a trap for the undisciplined neophyte writer; the lazy way out, a matter of pretending you are the character, and babbling out your own stream of consciousness accordingly. Whereas third person viewpoint with stream of consciousness requires more careful consideration, a more consciously and literarily crafted line of prose, a judicious maintenance of distance between the writer and the characters, much more control.

Well, maybe. Certainly modern third person viewpoint is the more flexible instrument, and certainly great reams of self-indulgent undisciplined crap have been written in first person by neophytes and experienced writers alike.

But, as we have seen, there are certain tales which *require* first person narration to succeed as stories at all. And, paradoxically enough, more often than not, first person narration, done right and arising out of story imperatives, far from being the undisciplined free-form babblement of the lazy writer's easy way out, is a *restrictive* device requiring a great deal of control and craft.

Whether in plot terms as in *A Philosophical Investigation,* or in characterological terms as in *Passion Play,* or dialectical terms as in *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone,* as often as not it serves the literary purpose not of revelation but of legitimate and necessary *concealment*—of knowledge from the reader, of identity from other characters, or even of the nature of their own true inner being from the first person narrators themselves.

"There are nine and sixty ways of composing tribal lays . . . "

And sometimes less is more. ●

(continued from page 304)

household about to receive a healing visit from "Grandfather Christmas." And then, as a palate-cleanser, new writer **Ray Vukcevich** offers us a nasty little Yuletide shocker about the selection of "The Perfect Gift."

As for those of you who spend the Holidays with your door locked and a sprig of holly ready at hand to drive through the hearts of any merrymakers who should somehow manage to stumble inside, don't worry—the rest of our December issue turns away from seasonal concerns. For instance, **Susan Casper** takes us about as far away as you *get* in our delightful December cover story, "Up the Rainbow," away from the mundane world altogether to the wonderful Land of Oz . . . although, as this wry and funny novella demonstrates, you can't entirely escape the winds of change, or halt the inexorable march of progress! New British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** then takes us away from the mundane world in quite a different way, hurtling us to a strange planet on the other side of the galaxy, and then plunging us into a terrifyingly alien environment to taste "The Blood of Angels." **Esther M. Friesner,** whose popular "All Vows" was on the Final Nebula Ballot this year, returns to give us a ringside seat for a moving and poignant confrontation between "Death and the Librarian." **Steven Popkes** takes us back to an earlier time for a nostalgic look at the people—of *all* sorts—who lived on "Dr. Couney's Island." And new writer **Daniel Marcus** takes us to a troubled near-future to eavesdrop on some compelling and compassionate "Conversations with Michael." Plus **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column, and an array of other columns and features.

Look for our big December issue on sale on your newsstands on October 11, 1994, or subscribe today and miss none of our upcoming issues!

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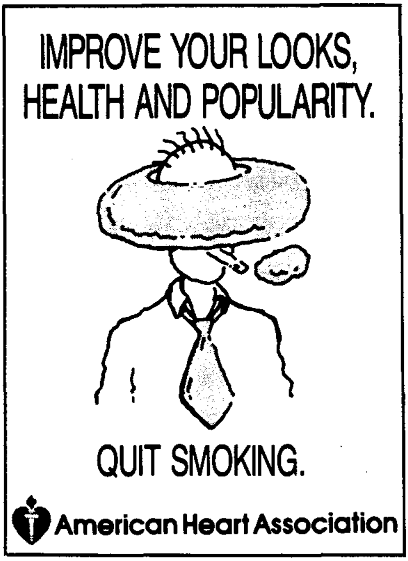
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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Note the upcoming deadline for $95 memberships in the 1995 WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me a SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700, Alexandria, VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send a SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard—Erwin S. Strauss.

SEPTEMBER 1994

16-18—**MosCon.** For info, write: **Box 9622, Moscow ID 83843.** Or phone: **(208) 882-3672 or (208) 332-1271** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Moscow ID (if city omitted, same as in address) at the University Inn Best Western. Guests will include: R. Zelazny, G. Davis, the Gordys.

23-25—**StarCon. (800) 733-8735 or (303) 671-8735.** Denver CO. A commercial Star Trek event.

23-25—**AndCon. (800) 529-3976 or (216) 673-2117.** Independence OH. War- and role-gaming meet.

24-25—**Montreal SF Festival. (514) 931-1815.** Ramada, Guy St., Montreal PQ. Media-oriented.

24-25—**Sparticus. (203) 746-5384.** Hilton & Towers, Danbury CT. Battletech & Mechwarrior gaming.

24-25—**LanternCon. (701) 235-2562.** Seven Seas Motor Inn, Bismarck ND. Commercial comics meet.

30-Oct. 2—**Rising Star, 545 Howard Dr., Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Written and media SF.

30-Oct. 2—**Arcana (MinnCon), 3136 Park Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55405. (612) 825-8256.** Horror.

30-Oct. 2—**VulKon, 12237 SW 50th, Cooper City FL 33330. (305) 434-6060.** Commercial Trek event.

30-Oct. 2—**First Contact, Box 82726, Milwaukee WI 53202.** Grand Milwaukee Hotel. E. Arnason.

30-Oct. 2—**Pern Gather, Metropolitan School, 7281 Sarah, St. Louis MO 63143. (314) 644-0850.**

30-Oct. 3—**Starman Family Con, 16563 Ellen Springs Dr., Lower Lake CA 95457. (707) 995-1228.**

OCTOBER 1994

1-2—**Organized Kahn-Fusion, 200 3rd St., New Cumberland PA 17070. (717) 774-6676.** Strategy gaming.

2—**MidOhio MiniCon, 5555 Hwy. S29, #313, Harrisburg NC 28075. (800) 243-8328.** Commercial comic con.

5-10—**Book Fair, Box 10 01 16, Frankfurt D-60001, Germany. (069) 2102-0.** For book professionals.

6-9—**Bouchercon, Box 75684, Seattle WA 98125.** World Mystery Con. Stouffer Madison. Muller, Chesbro.

7-9—**Spain Nat'l. Con, ℅ R. Martin Trechera, Ruiz de Alda #24-A, Cadiz 11008, Spain.** In Valencia.

7-9—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (512) 339-0673.** Red Lion, Moon, Cherry, Van Gelder.

8-9—**ArenaCon, Box 3594, Grand Central Station, New York NY 10163. (718) 881-4575.** Fantasy gaming.

9—**LanternCon, 540 Broadway, Fargo ND 58102. (701) 235-2562.** Brainerd MN. Commercial comics meet.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. The WorldCon. $95 to 9/30/94.

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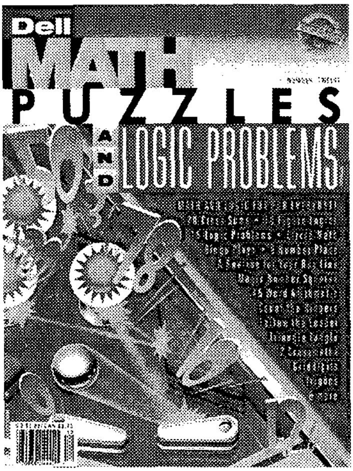

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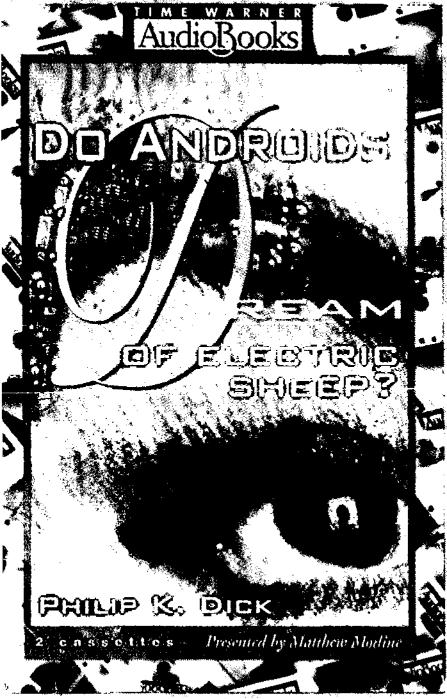
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